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FAR WEST

AMERICA'S LEADING WESTERN FICTION MONTHLY

REUNION
By Randolph Newman

APACHE WARPATH
By Robert Greth

An Exciting New Story By

LOUIS L'AMOUR

THE MARSHAL OF SENTINEL

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WESTERN NOVEL

RIVER FURY
By Stack Sutton

FAR WEST

AMERICA'S LEADING WESTERN FICTION MONTHLY

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MEMBER

WESTERN WRITERS OF AMERICA

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NOTICE

Last month we ran the concluding installment of Voyle Glover's novel, *THE TAKING OF A RANCH.* Since that issue went on sale we have received several letters responding to the idea of the two-or three-part novel. Some readers have been in favor of running continuing stories, while others have been dramatically opposed to "serials" in FAR WEST. To get a better idea of what you, the reader, really wants, we would appreciate it if you would fill out this questionaire, remove it and sent it to FAR WEST, Reader Survey, P.O. Box 2260, Costa Mesa, CA 92626.

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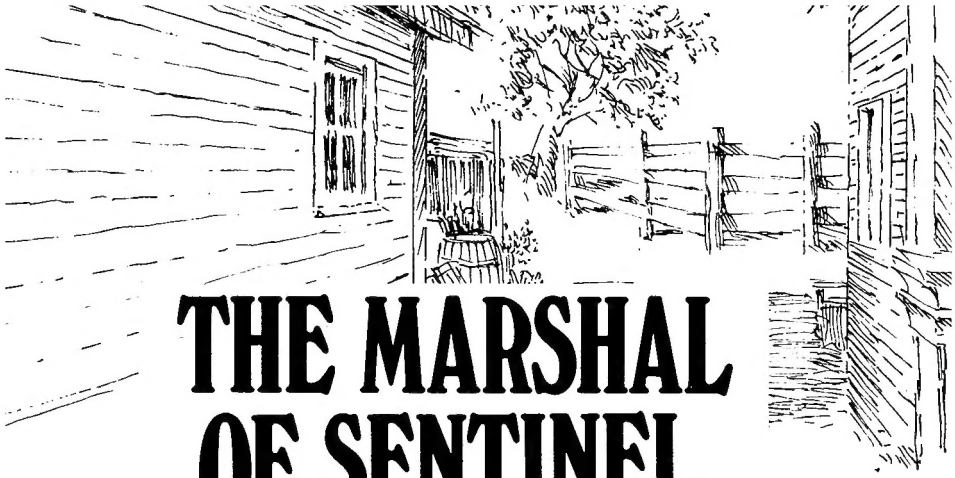

THE MARSHAL OF SENTINEL

By Louis L'Amour

At eight o'clock Marshal Fitz Moore left his house and walked one block west to Gard's Saloon. It was already open and Fitz glimpsed Gard's swamper sweeping the debris from the previous night. Crossing the street the marshal paused at the edge of the boardwalk to rub out his cigar on the top of the hitchingrail. As he did so he turned his eyes but not his head, glancing swiftly up the narrow street alongside the saloon. The gray horse was gone.

Fitz Moore hesitated, considering this, estimating time and probabilities. Only then did he turn and enter the restaurant just ahead of him.

The Fred Henry gang of outlaws had been operating in this corner of the Territory for more than two years, but the town of Sentinel had thus far escaped their attentions. Fitz Moore, who had been marshal of Sentinel for more than half that time, had taken care to study the methods of Henry and his men. In several recent raids the town marshal had been slain within minutes before the raid began, or just at that moment when the gang arrived in town.

A persistent pattern of operation had been established and

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invariably the raids had been timed to coincide with the availability of large sums of money. And such a time in Sentinel, Fitz Moore knew, was now upon them.

So, unless all his reasoning was at fault, the town was marked for a raid within the next two hours. And he was marked for death.

Fitz Moore was a tall, spare man with a dark, narrow face and carefully trimmed mustache. Normally his expression was placid, only his eyes seeming alive and aware.

As he entered the restaurant now he removed his flat-crowned black hat. His frock coat was unbuttoned offering easy access to the Smith & Wesson Russian .44. The gun was belted high and firmly on his left side just in front of his hip, butt to the right, the holster at a slight angle.

Three men and two women sat at the long community table but only one murmured a greeting. Jack Thomas glanced up and said, "Good morning, Marshal," his tone low and friendly.

Acknowledging the greeting, the marshal seated himself at the far end of the table and accepted the cup of coffee poured by the Chinese cook.

With his mind closed to the drift of conversation from the far end of the table he considered the situation that faced him. His days began in the same identical manner, with a survey of the town from each of the six windows of his house. This morning he had seen a gray horse tied behind Peterson's unused corral where it would not be seen by a casual glance.

With field glasses the marshal had examined the horse. It was streaked with the salt of dried sweat, evidence of hard riding. There were still some dark, damp spots indicating the horse had been ridden not long before, and the fact that it was still bridled and saddled indicated it would be ridden soon again. The brand was a Rocking R, not a local iron.

When Fitz Moore returned to his living room, he had seated himself and for an hour he read, occasionally glancing out the window. The gray horse had not been moved.

At eight when he had left for breakfast the horse was still

there, but by the time he had walked a block it was gone. And there lingered in the air a faint smell of dust.

Down the arroyo, of course, as it gave easy access to the forest and the mountain canyons where there was concealment and water. Taking into consideration the cool night, the sweat-streaked horse . . . not less than six miles to the point of rendezvous.

The rider of the gray had obviously been making a final check with a local source of information. To return to the rendezvous, discuss the situation and return gave him roughly two hours, perhaps a bit more. He would deal in minimums.

The marshal lighted a cigar, accepted a fresh cup of coffee from the Chinese and leaned back in his chair. He was a man of simple tastes and many appreciations. He knew little of cattle and less of mining, but two things he did know. He knew guns and he knew men.

He was aware of the cool gray eyes of the young woman, the only person present whom he did not know by sight. There was about her a nagging familiarity that disturbed him. He tasted his coffee and glanced out the window. Reason warned he should be suspicious of any stranger in town at such a time, yet every instinct told him he need not be suspicious of her.

The Emporium Bank would be open in about an hour. A few minutes later Barney Gard would leave his saloon and cross the street with the receipts from Saturday and Sunday. It could be a considerable sum.

The Emporium safe would be unlocked by that time and, as they had been accepting money from ranchers and dust from miners, there would be plenty of cash on hand. In approximately one hour there would be no less than twenty thousand dollars in spendable cash within easy reach of grasping fingers and ready guns.

The Henry gang would, of course, know this. By now they were in the saddle, leaving their camp.

He did not know the name of the stranger who played poker last week with the Catfish Kid, but he had known the face. It

had been the face of a man he had seen in Tascosa with the bandit leader, Fred Henry, two years ago. Tied to this was the fact that the Rocking R brand was registered to one Harvey Danuser, alias Dick Mawson, the fastest gunhand in the Henry outfit.

He was suddenly aware a question had been addressed to him. "What would you do, Marshal," Jack Thomas was asking, "if the Henry gang raided Sentinel?"

Fitz Moore glanced at the end of his cigar, then lifted his eyes to those of Jack Thomas. "I think," he said mildly, "I should have to take steps."

The marshal was not a precipitate man. Reputed to be fast and accurate with a gun, that fact had yet to be proved locally. Once, not long ago, he had killed the wrong man. He hoped never to make such a mistake again.

So far he had enforced the peace in Sentinel by shrewd judgment of character, appreciation of developing situations, and tactical moves that invariably left him in command. Authorized to employ an assistant, he had not done so. He preferred to work as he lived—alone.

He was, he acknowledged, although only to himself, a lonely man. If he possessed any capacity for affection or friendship it had not been obvious to the people of Sentinel. Yet this was an added strength. No one presumed to take him lightly or expect favoritism.

Long ago he had been considered a brilliant conversationalist and, in a time when a cowboy's saddle-bags might carry a volume of the classics as often as Ned Buntline, he was known as a widely read man. He had been a captain in the cavalry of the United States, a colonel in a Mexican revolution, a shotgun messenger for Wells Fargo, and a division superintendent on the Butterfield Stage line.

Naturally he knew about the Henry gang. They had been operating for several years but only of late had they exhibited a tendency to shoot first and talk later. This seemed to indicate that at least one of the gang had become a ruthless killer.

Three marshals had recently been killed, each one shot in the back, an indication that a *modus operandi* had been established. First kill the marshal, then rob the town. With the marshal out of action it was unlikely resistance could be organized before the outlaws had escaped.

Fitz Moore dusted the ash from his cigar. He thought the gray horse had been standing long enough to let the sweat dry, which meant the horse had been ridden into town before daybreak. At that hour everything was closed and he had seen nobody on the street, and that seemed to indicate the rider had gone inside somewhere. And that meant he not only knew where to go at that hour but where he would be welcomed.

So the Henry gang had an accomplice in Sentinel. When the rider of the gray horse left town that accomplice had undoubtedly been awake. With a raid imminent it was unlikely he would go back to sleep. What more likely place for him to be than right in this cafe? Here he could not only see who was around but would have a chance to judge the temper of the marshal.

Had anyone entered before he arrived? Fitz Moore knew everyone in the room except the girl with the gray eyes. She was watching him now.

Each of the others had a reason to be here at this hour. Barney Gard had opened his saloon and left it to the ministrations of his swamper. Jack Thomas directed the destinies of the livery stable. Johnny Haven, when he wasn't getting drunk and trying to free the town, was a hard-working young cowhand and thoroughly trustworthy.

The older of the two women present was Mary Jameson, a plump and gossipy widow, the town's milliner, dressmaker and Niagara of conversation. When she finished her breakfast she would walk three doors down the street and open her shop.

But what of the girl with the gray eyes? Her face was both delicate and strong, her hair dark and lovely, and she had a certain air of being to the manor born. Perhaps it was because she did possess that air, like someone from the marshal's own

past, that she seemed familiar And also, he thought reluctantly, she was just the sort of girl—

It was too late now. No use thinking of that. He was not fool enough to believe there could be any such girl for him. Not now. Not after all the years.

There was a definite antagonism in her eyes when she looked at him that he could not account for. He was accustomed to the attention of women, but not antagonistic attention.

Disturbed by it and by that haunting familiarity as of a forgotten name that lingers on the lips yet will not be spoken, he shook it off to consider his more immediate problem.

The marshal glanced thoughtfully at Johnny Haven. The young cowboy was staring sourly at his plate, devoting his attention almost exclusively to his coffee. Over his right temple was a swelling and a cut. This, coupled with his hangover, had left Johnny in a disgruntled mood. Last night had been the end of his monthly spree, and the swelling and cut were evidences of the marshal's attention.

Johnny caught the marshal's glance and scowled. "You sure leave a man with a headache, Marshal. Did you have to slug me with that gun barrel?"

Fitz Moore dusted the ash from his cigar again, smiling. "I didn't have an axe handle and nothing else would have been suitable for the job." He added casually, "Of course, I could have shot you."

Johnny was perfectly aware of that fact and most marshals might have done just that. Coming from Fitz Moore it was almost an apology.

"Is it so easy to kill men?" It was the girl with the gray eyes who spoke, her voice low and modulated but shaded with contempt.

"That depends," Fitz Moore replied quietly, "on the one doing the shooting and upon the circumstances."

"I think," and there was a flash of anger in her eyes, "that you would find it easy to kill. You might even enjoy killing. If you were capable of feeling anything at all."

The depth of feeling in her words was so obvious that, surprised, Johnny turned to look at her. Her face had gone pale, her eyes large.

The marshal's expression did not change. He knew Johnny understood, as any westerner would. Johnny Haven himself had given cause for shooting on more than one occasion. He also knew what Marshal Fitz Moore had just said to him was more of an explanation than he had ever given any man. Fitz Moore had arrested Johnny Haven six times in as many months, for after every payday Johnny came to town hunting trouble. Yet Fitz Moore knew that Johnny Haven was simply a wild youngster with a lot of good stuff in him, one who needed taming and a sense of responsibility.

The girl's tone carried an animosity for which none of them could account, and it left them uneasy.

Barney Gard got to his feet and dropped a dollar on the table. Johnny Haven followed him out and then the milliner left. Jack Thomas loitered over his coffee.

"That Henry outfit have me worried, Marshal," he said. "Want me to get down the old scatter-gun, just in case?"

Fitz Moore watched Barney Gard through the window. The saloonkeeper had paused on the walk to talk to Johnny Haven. Under the stubble of beard Johnny's face looked clean and strong, reminding the marshal, as it had before, of the face of another young man, scarcely older.

"It won't be necessary," Fitz Moore replied, "I'll handle them in my own way, in my own time. It's my job, you know."

"Isn't that a bit foolish? To refuse help?"

The contempt in her voice stirred him but he revealed nothing. He nodded gravely.

"Why, I suppose it might be, ma'am, but they hired me to do the job."

"Figured I'd offer," Thomas said, unwilling to let the subject drop. "You tell me what you figure to do and I'll be glad to help."

"Another time." The marshal tasted his coffee again and

looked directly at the girl. "You are new in Sentinel. Will you be staying long?"

"No."

"You have relatives here?"

"No."

He waited, but no explanation was offered. Fitz Moore was puzzled and he studied her from the corners of his eyes. There was no sound in the room but the ticking of the big, old-fashioned clock on the mantle.

The girl sat very still, the delicate line of her profile bringing to him a faint, lost feeling, a nostalgia from his boyhood when such women as she rode to hounds, when there was perfume in the air, blue grass, picket fences—

And then he remembered.

Thomas got to his feet. He was a big, swarthy man, always untidy, a bulge of fat pushing his wide belt. "You need any help, Marshal," he said, "you call on me."

Fitz Moore permitted himself one of his rare smiles. "If there is trouble, Jack," he said gently, "you'll be the first to know."

The clock ticked off the slow seconds after the door closed and then the marshal spoke into the silence.

"Why have you come here? What can you do in this palce?"

She looked up at him. "All I have is here. Just a little west of here. I left the stage to hire a rig . . . and then I heard your name and I wanted to see what manner of man it would be who would kill his best friend."

He got to his feet. At this moment he knew more than ever what loneliness meant.

"You judge too quickly. Each man must be judged against the canvas of his own time, of his own world."

"There is only one way to judge a killer."

"Wait. Wait just a little while and you will see what I mean. And please . . . stay off the street today. If you need a rig I will see you get a responsible man." He walked to the door and stopped with his hand on the knob. "He used to tell me about you. We talked often of you and I had come to feel I knew you.

I had hoped . . . before it happened . . . that someday we would meet. But in a different way than this.

"What will happen today I want you to see. I do not believe you lack the courage to watch what happens nor to revise your opinions if you feel you have been mistaken. Your brother, as you were advised in my letter, was killed by accident."

"But you shot him! You were in a great hurry to kill."

"I was in a gun battle. He ran up behind me."

"To help you."

"I believed him to be a hundred miles away, and in the town where we were I had no friends. It was quick . . . at such a time one acts."

"Kill first," she said bitterly, "and look afterwards."

His features were stiff. "I am afraid that is what often happens. I am sorry, Julia."

He lifted the latch. "When you see what is done today, try to imagine how else it might be handled. If you cannot see this as I do, then before night comes you will think me even more cruel than you now do. But you may understand, and where there is understanding there is no hate."

Outside the door he paused and surveyed the street with care. Not much longer now.

Across from him was Gard's Saloon. One block down the street his own office and his small home across the street from it. Just a little beyond was an abandoned barn. He studied it thoughtfully, glancing again at Gard's, the Bank diagonally across from the Saloon, right past the milliner's shop.

It would happen here, upon this dusty street, between these buildings. Here men would die, and it was his mission to see that good men lived and had their peace and the bad were kept from crime. As for himself, he was expendable. And which was he—the good or the bad?

Fitz Moore knew every alley, every door, every corner in this heat-baked, alkali-stamped cluster of life that would soon become an arena. His eyes turned again to the barn. It projected several feet beyond the otherwise carefully lined build-

ings. The big door through which hay had once been hoisted gaped wide.

So little time!

He knew what they said about him. "Ain't got a friend in town," he had overheard Mrs. Jameson say. "Lives to hisself in that old house. Got it full of books, folks say. But kill you quick as a wink, he would. He's cold . . . mighty cold."

Was he?

When first he came to the town he found it a shambles, wrecked by a passing trail herd crew. It had been terrorized by two dozen gunmen and gamblers, its citizens robbed by card sharks and thieves. Robbery had been the order of the day, murder all too frequent. It had been six months since the last robbery of any kind, nine months since the last murder. Did that count for nothing?

He took out a fresh cigar and bit off the end. What was the matter with him today? He had not felt like this in years. Was it what they say happens to a drowning man and his life was passing before his eyes just before the end? Or was it simply that he had seen Julia Heath, the sum and total of all he had ever wanted in a girl? And realizing who she was, realized also how impossible it had become?

They had talked of it, he and Tom Heath, and he knew Tom had written to Julia, suggesting she come west because he had found the man for her. And two weeks later Tom was dead with his, with Fitz Moore's bullet in his heart.

The marshal walked along the street of false-fronted, weather-beaten buildings. Squalid and dismal as they might seem to a stranger they were the center of the world for those who lived in the country around. Here where mountains and desert met the town was changing. It was growing with the hopes of its citizens and with the changing of times and of needs. This spring, for the first time, flowers had been planted in the yard of a house near the church, and trees had been trimmed in another.

From a haphazard collection of buildings catering to the needs of a transient people, the town of Sentinel was acquir-

ing a sense of belonging, a consciousness of the future. The days of drifting cattle were soon to be gone and where they had walked men would build and plant and harvest.

Fitz Moore turned into the empty alley between the Emporium and the general store. Thoughts of his problem returned. With the marshal dead the town would lie helpless until other men could gather, choose a leader and act. For the moment the town would be helpless—

But how did they plan to kill him? That it had been he was sure. When the time came it must be done quickly, for the marshal would be the focal point of resistance.

The loft of the abandoned barn commanded a view of the street. The outlaws would come into town riding toward the barn and somewhere along the street the marshal of Sentinel would be walking, covered by a hidden rifleman.

He climbed the stairs to the barn loft. The dust on the steps had been disturbed. At the top a board creaked under his boot. A rat scurried away. The loft was wide and empty. Only dust and wisps of hay, a few cobwebs.

From that wide door the raid might be stopped but this was not the place for him. His place was down there in that hot, dusty street where his presence would count. Much remained to be done and there was little time.

Returning to his quarters, Fitz Moore thrust an extra gun into his pocket and belted on a third. Then he put two shotguns into a wood sack. Nobody would be surprised to see him carrying the sack for he used it to bring firewood from the pile back of Gard's.

He saw Jack Thomas seated in a chair before the livery stable. Barney Gard came from the saloon, glanced at the marshal as if to assure himself of his presence, then went back inside. Fitz Moore paused, relighting his dead cigar, surveying the street over the match and under the brim of his hat.

The topic of what might happen here if the Henry gang tried a raid was not a new one. There had been much speculation. Several men, aside from Thomas, had brought up the sub-

ject. Trying to feel him out, to discover what *he* thought, what he might plan to do.

Jack Thomas turned his head to glance at the marshal. He was a big, easygoing man, but lazy and never too clean.

Johnny Haven, sitting on the steps of the saloon porch, looked up at the marshal, grinning. "How's the town clown?" he asked.

Moore paused near him, drawing deep on the cigar and permitting himself a glance toward the loft door, almost sixty yards away and across the street. Deliberately he had placed himself in line with the best shooting position.

"Johnny," he said, "if anything happens to me, I want you to have this job. If nothing happens to me, I want you for my deputy."

Young Haven could not have been more astonished, but he was also deeply moved. He looked up as if he believed the marshal might have been suddenly affected by the heat. Aside from the words the very fact the marshal had ventured a personal remark was astonishing.

"You're twenty-six, Johnny, and it's time you grew up. you've played at being the town roughneck long enough. I've looked the town over and decided you're the man I want."

Johnny . . . Tom. He tried to avoid thinking of them together but there was a connection. Tom had been a good man, too; now he was a good man gone. Johnny was a good man . . . there had been many stories of how dependable he was out on the range . . . but Johnny was walking the hairline of the law. A step too far and he might become an outlaw.

Johnny Haven was profoundly impressed. To say that he respected and admired this tall, composed man was no more than the truth. After his first arrest by Moore Johnny had been furious enough to kill, but each time he came into town he found himself neatly boxed and helpless.

Nor had Moore ever taken unfair advantage, never striking one blow more than essential, and never keeping the cowhand in jail an hour longer than necessary. And Johnny Haven

was honest enough to realize he could never have handled the situation as well.

Anger had dissolved into reluctant admiration. Only native stubbornness and the pride of youth had prevented him from giving up the struggle.

"Why pick on me?" He spoke roughly to cover his emotion. "You won't be quitting."

There was a faint suggestion of movement from the loft. The marshal glanced at his watch. Two minutes to ten.

"Johnny—" The sudden change of tone brought Johnny's head up sharply. "When the shooting starts there are two shot guns in this sack. Get behind the water-trough and use one of them. Shoot from under the trough. It's safer."

Two riders walked their horses into the upper end of the street, almost a half block away. Two men on powerful horses, better horses than were likely to be found on any cow ranch.

Three more riders emerged from a space between the buildings, from the direction of Peterson's Corral. One of them was riding a gray horse. They were within twenty yards when Barney Gard came from his saloon carrying two canvas bags. He was starting for the bank and one of the horsemen reined his mount around to come between Barney and his goal.

"Shotgun in the sack, Gard." The marshal's tone was conversational.

Then, as sunlight glinted from a rifle-barrel in the loft-door, Fitz Moore took one step forward, drawing as he moved, and the thunder of the rifle merged with the bark of his own gun. Then the rifle clattered, falling, and an arm fell loosely from the loft-door.

The marshal turned instantly. "All right, Henry!" His voice like the blare of a trumpet in the narrow street. "You're asking for it! Now *take* it!"

There was no request for surrender. The rope awaited these men, death rode their hands and their guns.

As one man they drew. The marshal sprang to the street, landing flat-footed and firing. The instant of surprise was his

and they were mounted on nervous horses. His first shot had taken the man in the loft, the second killed Fred Henry.

Behind and to his right a shotgun's deep roar blasted the sun-filled morning. The man on the gray horse died falling, his gun throwing a useless shot into the hot, still air.

A rider leaped his horse at the marshal but Fitz Moore stood his ground and fired. The rider's face seemed to disintegrate under the impact of the bullet.

And then there was silence. The roaring of guns was gone and only the faint smells lingered, the acrid tang of gunpowder, of blood in the dust, the brighter crimson of blood on a saddle.

Johnny Haven got up slowly from behind the horse trough. Barney Gard stared around as if just awakened, the canvas bags at his feet, his hands gripping a shotgun.

There was a babble of sound then, of people running into the street. And a girl with gray eyes was watching. Those eyes seemed to reach across the street and into the heart of the marshal.

"Only one shot!" Barney Gard exclaimed. "I got off only one shot and missed that one!"

"The Henry gang wiped out!" yelled an excited citizen. "Wait until Thomas hears this!"

"He won't be listenin'," somebody else said. "They got him."

Fitz Moore turned like a duellist. "I got him," he said flatly. "He was their man. He tried all morning to find out what I'd do if they showed up. Besides, he was hostler at a livery stable at the time of the holdup at the Springs."

An hour later Johnny Haven followed the marshal into the street. Four men were dead, two were in jail.

"How did you know, Marshal?"

"You learn, Johnny. You learn or you die. That's your lesson for today. Learn to be in the right place at the right time and keep your own council. You'll be getting my job." His cigar was gone. He bit the end from a fresh one and went on.

"Jack Thomas was the only man the rider of the gray horse could have seen without crossing the street. He wouldn't have

left a horse he needed for a quick getaway on the wrong side of the street."

When he entered the eating house Julia Heath was at her table again. She was white and shaken.

"I am sorry, Julia, but now you know how little time there is when guns are drawn. These men came to steal the money honest men worked to earn, and they would have killed again as they have killed before. Such men know only the law of the gun." He placed his hands on the table. "I should have known you at once, Julia, but I never thought . . . after what happened . . . that you would come. I did not think about Tom's ranch. He was proud of you, Julia, and he was my best friend."

"But you killed him."

Marshal Moore gestured toward the street. "It was like that. Guns exploding, a man dying almost at my feet, then someone running up behind me in a town where I had no friends. I shot at a man who was firing, turned and fired at one running up on me. And I had killed my friend, your brother."

She knew then how it must have been for this man and she was silent.

"And now?" she asked finally.

"My job goes to Johnny Haven but I shall stay here and try to help the town grow. This should end it for awhile; in the meantime the town can mature, settle down and become a place to live in instead of a place to camp for a night."

"It . . . I guess it's worth doing."

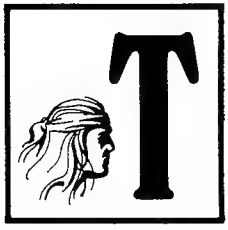
"It is." He put down his unlighted cigar. "You will be driving over to settle Tom's estate. When you come back you might feel like stopping off again. If you do, I'll be waiting to see you."

She looked at him again, looking beyond the coldness, the stillness, seeing the man her brother must have known. "I think I shall. I think I will stop . . . when I come back."

Out in the street a man was raking dust over the blood. Back of the barn an old hen cackled, and somewhere a pump began to complain rustily, drawing clear water from a deep, cold well.

APACHE WARPATH

By Robert Greth



he rising sun singed away the last webs of fog as Martin Daniger crept up to the edge of the tiny arroyo. He was amazed at how little Seth Barlow learned during his years as a high-line rider: A tenderfoot might have read the many signs he left. The aromatic wood he used for cooking his breakfast wafted through the stunted oaks. No doubt every creature in the Dragoon Mountains scented his presence. The aroma of coffee boiling reminded Daniger of his own hunger. He neglected breakfast lest the odor of burning wood alert Barlow. Obviously such precautions hadn't been necessary.

Hunting badmen for bounties didn't have the challenge of hunting warring Apaches: Outlaws lacked the skill of hiding their tracks, however hard they tried.

With skills acquired during the years he served as an Army scout, Daniger's new profession paid handsomely in bounties. But he hated to admit, even to himself, he missed the excitement, pitting his skills against those of a resourceful enemy. The life Martin Daniger understood was gone, replaced by a world he didn't understand. Chasing outlaws earned him money but it wasn't substitute for the old life . . . Dreaming about his last campaign with General Crook in Mexico, about scouts such as Al Sieber and Tom Horn, was a waste . . . Times changed, people were different.

Moving closer to the edge of the little arroyo, Daniger brought his .45/70 Winchester to bear on Barlow's broad back, wondering how a sensible man could drink his coffee, blinded to what occurred behind him. He stood up and picked his way down the slanting slope, his shin-high Apache moccasins barely disturbing the dirt and shale.

A sudden gust fanned the ash-covered embers of the cook

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fire, causing the coals to glow. Barlow reached for the coffee pot, filling his cup; he put the pot on the ground beside a greasy skillet. He sipped his coffee like a carefree honest citizen.

"Save a cup for me, Barlow," Daniger said, nudging a spot between his shoulder blades with the muzzle of his carbine.

"Cris!" Barlow gasped. "Who are you? How did you find me?"

Daniger stepped in front of him. "Anybody could. Now I'd be obliged if you poured me some coffee."

"Jus' a minute." Barlow squinted his rheumy eyes at Daniger, acting like a man trying to recall something. Sparse gray whiskers sprouted from his flabby jowls; his face was splotchy red from wind and sun and from, perhaps, frequent bouts with the bottle. His weakness for the bottle may have contributed to his carelessness, Daniger concluded. "I know. You're Martin Daniger, ain't you?" he began anew. "Saw you once at Camp Grant. You was an Injun fighter, huh? . . . Yes, sir, and now a bounty hunter."

Puddles of water sparkled in the stony bottom of the arroyo from the rain two nights ago. Among the eroded rocks there glinted a *tinaja,* a quiet, clear water, a stony little basin from which Barlow must have fetched water for his pot of Arbuckle. Chosing a rock near the *tinaja* Daniger sat down, and jabbed his gun at Barlow.

"Drop your gunbelt. And no funny tricks or I'll take you back across the saddle of your horse."

"Sure, sure." He unbuckled his gunbelt. "Besides, I ain't got enough money to get shot for. Guess my ears are gettin' worse—'cause I didn't hear your horse comin'."

"I didn't ride her—she's back there apiece."

Such precautions to catch a bumbling old man who ought to be sitting on a front porch watching the world go by. The water in the *tinaja* had the quality of a flawed mirror: If Barlow was old, the gray in his waxed mustache and auburn hair didn't exclude him. They were both anachronisms: Men who attempted to recapture a past, a fleeting few minutes crushed

by a lively present. Discontent filled Daniger like a slow poison.

"How about the coffee, Barlow?"

"I ain't got but one cup."

"Then wash it."

Barlow got up and stepped to the *tinaja*, an old fat man with sagging suspenders and capacious pants. Crouching, with his legs apart, he plunged the cup in the water many times, shaking it several times to remove the last drop. While Barlow washed the cup, Daniger gazed absently at the muddy places and noted with sudden interest moccasin prints: a vague heel mark and a partial imprint of an instep. He tempered his excitement with good sense. In these happy times the imprint of Apache moccasins meant nothing. Yet past training wouldn't permit him to ignore unexplained signs. There was a good chance that an Indian thief relieved Barlow of his precious belongings. The outlaw's saddle and saddle bags lay near the fire with a blanket tossed over them. Nothing would have been stolen, since Barlow slept there.

Daniger got up and saw two distinct footprints leading up the opposite bank.

Barlow waddled back, frowning as he watched Daniger. "What's wrong? You huntin' for somethin'?"

"Have you missed anything? Maybe have something stolen?"

He looked wide-eyed and then a jagged grin rippled in response. "I'm the crook, Mr. Daniger, ain't I?" He chuckled, "Stolen. I got less than three hundred dollars."

"I don't see your horse."

His rheumy eyes teared and lines of worry tightened his features. "Why—over there—in that *bosque* of oaks."

"Maybe. Let's find out."

"What do you mean, *maybe?* My claybank gelding's there, I say."

He followed Daniger up the other side of the arroyo but there were no more moccasin prints. Barlow's own boot prints left a clear track into the oaks, made when he led his mount into the woods.

"Why did you choose to ride a claybank, Barlow?" Daniger asked.

"He's a fine horse."

"Not for an outlaw. In a town full of horses, yours would stand out."

Barlow's gaping dismay didn't surprise Daniger, when the outlaw failed to find his claybank. He trotted heavily, scouring every place, but his claybank was gone . . . Daniger was certain a horse-thieving young Apache stole his mount while he slept. Barlow was lucky to be alive. Too bad for Barlow, but hunting Aapches wasn't his business anymore.

"Stolen," Barlow declared.

"Some young Apache buck, no doubt. Maybe to get your dander up . . . I don't know."

"I thought them Apaches was peaceful now."

"They are. But like white folk, they have their thieves. Maybe he's an outcast and rode your horse to Mexico, hoping to join those die-hards in the Sierra Madres. Maybe he wants to join that murdering bunch called *Netdahe* and take that ancient blood oath. Yet he didn't kill you."

"I'm glad of that. But, hell, I can't walk far."

"Walking back to Tucson will take off some of your blubber, Barlow."

"It will kill me."

They returned to Barlow's camp but Daniger wasn't satisfied and decided to look for prints at the other end of the arroyo. A renegade Apache ought to have killed Barlow after he stole his horse. After all, every white man becomes an intruder on Apache lands once the *Netdahe* way of life has been chosen by the brave.

Barlow kept up with Daniger, his silence hinting his anxiety. The arroyo offered no clues to help Daniger to understand the thief's motives: In the bed of the arroyo there wasn't a single moccasin print. Nor a hoof print to indicate the Apache led the claybank up the arroyo.

The Apache thief didn't wish to risk detection. But, *why?*

Was he being pursued by the Apache police or a white posse?

At last Daniger saw two faint moccasin prints pointed in the direction of Barlow's campsite. The Apache who stole Barlow's claybank entered at the other end of the tiny arroyo. Times hadn't changed so much that young Apaches forgot the skills they learned.

Barlow was alive because some renegade Apache, a bronco, wished to be elusive. But Martin Daniger wasn't satisfied to let things remain partially answered. He hurried to the other end of the arroyo.

There Daniger saw many moccasin tracks with no effort on the part of the Aapches to conceal them. "Whoo-ah," he muttered, noting the confused prints leading to the top of the ground above the arroyo. He climbed to the top, with Barlow panting behind him. There were five or six braves in the band, yet only one Indian stole into Barlow's camp and took his horse . . . Then he saw hoof prints belonging to the claybank, no doubt. The old feeling of excitement stirred as he attempted to assess the meaning . . . The moccasin prints disappeared into the oak grove toward the northwest in the direction of a curious-looking knob rising out of the woods, a spot maybe three miles away. The summit was rocky with trees crowning the top. It was just the sort of a place outlaw Apaches would use to hide for protection.

Old Barlow nervously knuckled a tear off his cheek. "Apache tracks, ain't they, Mr. Daniger?" His voice failed, marked by tiny cracks in the timbre. "We're in for trouble, huh?"

He tugged at the wattles under his neck, anxiety in his face.

"A gang of young thieves, I suspect." But his own words didn't reassure him. "They're like all outlaws. But they left you alive, that's what I don't understand."

"What about my horse?" A trace of gummy spittle adhered to his quivering lips. "Walkin' to Tucson. I'm too old for that."

Daniger descended into the arroyo. "There's nothing we can do about the horse."

Barlow stomped down into the arroyo, holding out his short

fat arms like wings, balancing himself.

Recovering a stogie and lucifer from his pocket Daniger bit the end off the cigar, thinking about the small band of Apaches. Snapping the lucifer alight with his thumb, he puffed, enjoying the pleasant bouquet of the stogie. He pitied Barlow as he observed the frightened old man, as much out of his time as he happened to be. The outlaw's gaze roved as if he expected to be attacked by the Apaches who stole his horse. His tongue flicked nervously between his lips.

Daniger poked a stogie into his face and Barlow's hand trembled as he accepted it. He continued spitting as he tried to get rid of the tobacco end he bit off. At last he picked the tiny wedge of tobacco off with his forefinger. His search for a match might have continued but Daniger snapped another afire with his thumbnail.

"Here, Barlow." At last the burning match caught up with his shaking stogie. "We'll go back and get your saddle. You can sell it to get a lawyer . . . I'm not having anything to do with this Apache business . . . One man against six, say."

"That means, I'm walkin' to jail, huh?"

Having macerated the mouth-end of his cigar with spittle, Barlow puffed without success. Daniger gave him a lucifer and the outlaw bent over, striking the match on a stone, but as he lifted his head to light the cigar a shocked expression came over him as he stared at silent figures sliding down into the arroyo. The match burned his finger, sticking to it before he shook it off.

"I ain't armed," he gasped.

Daniger remained motionless, his hand hanging at his side, holding his Winchester, while his other hand held the stogie he puffed. The six Apaches showed no hostility, holding their rifles at arms' length or cradled in their arms. Barlow acted as if he might run or simply faint.

As Daniger attempted to ascertain whether they happened to be the same band whose signs he cut, an old Apache walked to

the edge of the arroyo, then slid down to join the others. Almost at once he came toward Daniger with his hand outstretched.

"Howdy, Martin."

"Welcome, Golinka," Daniger said in the language of The People. "It's been a long time."

"Too long, my brother," Golinka replied, lifting his lofty nose and sniffing.

Retrieving a stogie, Daniger handed it to Golinka, then steadied his own while the *nantan* lighted his from the glowing end. Daniger might have inquired about Golinka's presence in the Dragoon Mountains but it wasn't the Apache way. In his own good time he would reveal the purpose of his trip to the mountains. He knew it wasn't an accidental meeting with Golinka, the Skunk.

"I hope you're well, Golinka."

He snorted with disdain behind a haze of smoke. "An old bear seeks shelter under a rock shelf but the young bears claim the best, the driest dens. My stomach is good, I fatten on government beef." The palm of his hand moved over his protruding, round belly for Daniger's benefit. "I'm at peace with the *Nakai-ye,* for I'm told the Mexicanos are my brothers."

Barlow's stogie was out again but he chewed it nervously. "Ask about my claybank."

"All men are brothers today," Daniger said, selecting a rock and sitting on it.

Whatever his age, Golinka's face appeared unchanged: soft like deep brown leather, seeming to be patched with the seams showing.

Squeezing in beside him, Golinka said, "If that's true, Martin, why do my young Mescaleros get drunk and kill each other? Why don't I feel this love? Has my heart grown calloused like this hand?" he asked, opening his hand under Daniger's nose.

He glared at Barlow. "Men forget love and rob folk."

Golinka laughed, black spaces showing lost teeth. "That bandido must walk to the calaboose."

"How do you know this?"

"Last night we tracked broncos here. Oh, they got away with his horse but he's alive, and you'll collect bounty money. Gato Negro's now the owner of a pretty claybank. It gives the Netdahe importance."

"Gato Negro—out of prison?"

He didn't forget the Netdahe who left the fastness of his Sierra Madre hideout for weapons and bullets in Arizona. Quite by chance he saw the Mexican girl, Constanza, and decided to have her for himself. Killing her parents to get her meant little to the Netdahe. In due time the *Nakai muchacha* would forget her parents and that he murdered them: for there would be no one but himself to care for and protect her.

Martin Daniger accompanied by three Mescalero scouts trapped the Netdahe chief in a canyon. The three broncos who were with him were killed and Gato Negro surrendered for want of ammunition. Of the three scouts with Daniger only Bonito, Golinka's nephew, was slain. Seldom had Daniger thought about the incident, for with Gato Negro in prison those six years it was truly something in the past.

"Gato Negro escaped?"

Golinka's thin smile tore the seams. "Killed—and escaped."

According to Apache custom Golinka wouldn't mention his dead nephew. But he didn't forget. Revenge for an injury, a wrong, was felt by them with a religious fervor. It might damage their friendship but Daniger thought Golinka could seek out the Netdahe and have his revenge: For himself there was neither money nor glory in hunting for Gato Negro. The fool Netdahe wasn't content to dream of the past but wished to revive it out of the ashes. If Gato Negro escaped Golinka, the *Rurales* and *Federales* in Mexico would run him down like a wild beast.

Daniger tossed his stogie in a puddle where it sizzled briefly, then arose. *"Ugashi.* Go, Golinka, and good hunting."

The old Mescalero smoked his stogie pinched between his thumb and forefinger. Cocking his head he looked up at Daniger.

"The two scouts who helped you to capture Gato Negro have been killed by him. They were unarmed, Martin."

Daniger was stunned at first, then anger burned in him like a fever. Gato Negro challenged him, his defiance like a gauntlet flung at his feet. He remembered the two murdered scouts, but out of habit and respect for The People he refused to recall their names lest *Ga-n,* those evil spirits, tormented their souls. Now he understood Golinka's trip to the Dragoon Mountains. It was his duty in memory of his scouts to revenge them. But those customs belonged to the past and it was the present he wished to live in.

"The law will take care of Gato Negro." It hurt to speak thus for Golinka's ears, for one who might believe him cowardly as well as old. He didn't wish to revert to the past, making the present less tolerable. "Today there are no white scouts nor Apache scouts. . . *Ugashi,* Golinka, and kill the Netdahe."

Golinka spit tobacco particles and got to his feet. "The law won't punish Gato Negro, not when the posse rides south." Dropping the stogie butt, he ground it into the dirt with the toe of his moccasin. "You're right, Martin. There's no scouts on the trail and no war. What does it matter that the Netdahe has taken Constanza, the *Nakai* girl as hostage?"

"My God! Constanza. He has taken that little girl again? The Netdahe's mad, loco." But he realized there was purpose in Gato Negro's abduction of Constanza: It was an expression of disdain for the man who helped to capture and imprison him. "Why does he want her after so long?"

Golinka smiled as if satisfied with a personal sense of triumph.

"He has taken the Nakai muchacha to draw you into a duel. But you know that, Martin. He's clever, that one. With his wild tales of glory fighting the white men, he's recruited six of my young men. He hated you for having helped to put him in a cage . . . What better way to impress those young fools than in killing you?"

"Maybe I'll not die too easily." It was possible to have left

the two murdered scouts unavenged and incur Golinka's contempt, but kidnapping Constanza was an affront he didn't intend to leave unchallenged. The image in his mind of Constanza was of a skinny child with big black eyes too large for her little face. "How did he find the Nakai child?"

"Who can say? How did he escape from prison? But the Nakai squaw's no girl now, Martin, but a grown woman. Maybe he wants her for himself—just as before."

"Have you seen her?"

"I saw her and she's well."

"Did the Netdahe promise to release her if I win?"

"He refused to talk about the girl, saying only that he means to kill you."

The old Mescalero didn't have to remind him of the girl's maturity: but with the passage of time certain events grew hazy, got muddled. Six years ago, Constanza was about thirteen years of age: Gato Negro, the Netdahe, was perhaps eighteen, in his prime as a brave. He was almost twice Gato Negro's age: something to give him pause. Against such young muscles and vigor he had to win quickly.

"You know the custom, Martin. You must fight till one of you is dead." Golinka appeared content but the old Apache couldn't conceal a note of concern in his tone. "The Netdahe lives as his ancestors, living a hate which goes back to the days of the Spanish conquerors."

"I know. Death to all intruders. Well, Coronado has been dead a long time and I hope to send Gato Negro to join him in the Big Sleep."

"What's happening?" Barlow asked, still sucking on his soggy cigar.

"Nothing for you to worry about, Barlow," Daniger snapped. "I must get my mare, Golinka."

"We have her, Martin."

"I might have known."

Golinka's young braves, having listened the while in silence, mounted the side of the arroyo at a run with a signal from their

chief. It was settled and Daniger too preferred quiet contemplation, and gestured to Barlow to climb the arroyo. Then with Golinka he went to the top.

From the bosque of oaks came the pounding of hoofs and Golinka's braves rode out, leading Daniger's piebald mare and a horse belonging to the old Mescalero.

Barlow's stogie wasn't visible, having been chewed into a wad, but tobacco juice stained his lips.

Daniger observed that Golinka still had his old .45/70 trapdoor Springfield carbine in a saddle sheath.

They rode at a walk with Barlow trying to keep up with them, skipping and running with heavy strides.

"Mr. Daniger, I can't keep up," Barlow shouted. "I ain't no horse."

Daniger drew up and waited for the outlaw.

"There's trouble brewin' here," he gasped, "and I want to keep you in sight."

Golinka's men continued riding, but he stopped till Daniger caught up with him. He pointed to the rocky knob rising out of the forest. "Gato Negro's up there."

They started riding again but Barlow, pounding after them, lost ground almost at once.

Narrowing his eyes against the brassy sunlight filtering through the trees Daniger noticed it was hotter, and he dreaded the forthcoming fight with Gato Negro on the knob.

Barlow acted like he was about to fall from exhaustion. He put each foot forward as if weighted with leaden boots. Shrilling his misery with oaths and pleas, he flopped down, gesturing to Daniger with heavy hands.

"He means money to me," Daniger remarked to Golinka.

The Mescalero said nothing, but a twinkle of amusement in his eyes didn't escape Daniger.

When Daniger dismounted Barlow lay with his mouth open, breathing as if his fat old heart might break, and resembling a lumpy sack.

"You're worth five hundred dollars to me, Barlow. Get on

my horse. Any tricks and I'll blow you out of the saddle."

For awhile it looked as if Barlow wouldn't be able to get his foot in the stirrup, but he pulled himself into the saddle at last.

Daniger walked behind the mare, expecting Barlow to fall off, as he drooped, hanging on awkwardly. He drew a forearm across his sweating brow, appearing to perk up a bit. His florid face was cast in a deeper hue.

"You're a real gentleman, Mr. Daniger . . . I jus' couldn't have made it, walkin'. I ain't never met a gentleman like you."

Golinka's braves were not in sight, but the Mescalero chief sat his horse, waiting for Daniger.

Daniger sweated almost as much as Barlow and he understood how tiring would be the heat, fighting a young man. In some way he had to outwit the Netdahe, goad him into rashness.

Golinka pointed to the knob. "We are there."

The Mescaleros were waiting at the base when they arrived. Daniger observed that to get to the top on horseback, the animal had to mount a series of rock shelves, narrow projections of rock much like crude steps. He didn't intend to risk his mare, nor his own safety, riding to the top, even though the young renegades up there succeeded.

Sliding off the mare, Barlow followed the gaze of the others and at once displayed terror and despair at the prospect of climbing to the top.

"Cris', I can't get up there."

"Ugashi!" Golinka said to a brave. "Tell the Netdahe Martin is here to kill him . . . Fire a shot if he still wishes to fight . . . Fire one into his heart if he proves treacherous."

The Apache scrambled up with the swiftness of an antelope, leaping on to each succeeding elevation, without pause. Then he vanished from sight at some circuitous turn near the top. A shot echoed on top.

Golinka waved his young braves to start climbing. Daniger climbed behind them while Golinka followed. Barlow took the rear, clumsily crawling onto the protruding shelves of rock.

Daniger wondered how long the old outlaw might continue his labored climb.

Only scattered cacti covered the rocky pinnacle. Sweating more with each upward step, Daniger tasted the soapy residue from his waxed mustache. Every rock he touched felt as if it had been heated on a fire. With the heat to contend with, the youth of the Netdahe would tell if the battle lasted too long.

Golinka's young men were already out of sight, probably waiting on top.

When Daniger and Golinka reached the top, the Mescalero's braves waited. They occupied one side of the knob and Gato Negro's recruits faced them on the other side. Daniger noted Gato Negro was in front of his hopeful new Netdahes. He sensed hatred as the Apache glared at him: It was in his stance, in the tautness of his muscles. Among the horses there was Barlow's claybank.

"My claybank," Barlow gasped with indignation.

He spoke the first words but nobody heeded him.

Gato Negro strode to the middle ground, defiant, contempt in the lift of his chin, the fullness of chest. A turban of red flannel wrapped his head and a blouse gray with much washing hung below his waist. Apache moccasin boots, he wore rolled below his knees; his long breechclout didn't hide his muscular thighs.

Daniger allowed his gaze to roam and at last saw Constanza. She literally hung from a post driven into a huge pile of rocks. Rawhide lashed her ankles together at the post and her arms had been yanked back, securing her wrists behind the post in the same cruel manner. Sweat saturated her dress; her pinioned arms showed distorted bones and muscles; her dress, ripped with manhandling, exposed her breasts to a scorching sun. Her eyes met Daniger's and he thought he saw a plea in them. He sweated more because of seething anger.

The thing he wanted to avoid was to hint to the Netdahe his compassion, the pity he felt. He ambled forth to meet Gato Negro who waited with folded arms. His attempt to deceive the

Apache failed. Gato Negro's gathering smile, his glancing at Constanza, disclosed that he understood the source of his enemy's ill-disguised anger.

"Viejo, the plight of the Nakai woman has torn your heart." He looked at his men, his jibe for their benefit. "You may save the Mexicano muchacha but I doubt it. You'll join the two false Apaches I killed. Arm yourself, viejo, and pray your end is quick."

"It is the Netdahe who is dead already," Daniger said. "You belong to another world. You belong in the shadows, Gato Negro . . . Tormentor of girls . . . Release her . . . The battle is ours."

Gato Negros lips parted in a grin resembling a grimace.

"Within a short time you'll join the Nameless Ones, *viejo*. I may slay you first or I may kill her during our fight . . . But be certain of this—the Nakai squaw dies."

With those parting words, Gato Negro gave Daniger his back and strutted to join his eager, wild-eyed recruits.

With as much contempt as his gait might imply Martin Daniger strolled toward Golinka. The Mescalero nantan accepted his Winchester, then plopped his hat on his head, draping at last Daniger's coat over his shoulder. Golinka pulled a war club from under his blouse, its stone head sewed in a single piece of rawhide. Hefting the club, Daniger permitted the leather loop on its handle to dangle around his wrist.

"Golinka," he said, "if Gato Negro kills me, try to help the girl."

"I will try."

Daniger recognized the futility in the Mescalero's almost bland tone. How does one deprive a victor of his spoils?

When he turned to look at the middle ground, the Netdahe stood with his legs apart, cutting the air with vicious swipes of his war club. Daniger moved to meet the Apache, again taking his time, walking as if but to meet an opponent in a harmless game. Gato Negro rushed him with a show of impatience.

This was the action Daniger had hoped for. Till the last

moment he acted like he was taken with surprise. Then he spun away as Gato Negro swung his club. He delivered a counter blow, the stone head missing the Netdahe's face by a fraction of an inch.

Fury lined Gato Negro's face. He changed his wild tactics, stalking Daniger, circling around for an opening. He struck and both clubs hit together with a dry thud, becoming entangled; both men yanked to separate them. Suddenly the war clubs were free. Gato Negro delivered a chopping blow but Daniger sidestepped and pounced on Gato Negro with a hard blow to the shoulder that sent him staggering. Gasping for air, the Netdahe spun away. Still, Daniger's war club hit the Apache in the belly.

Gato Negro doubled for a second. He threw an arm up to protect his head. He spun away and Daniger's next blow smashed on his shoulder.

He glimpsed a trace of pain on the Netdahe's stony face. He jumped forward, hoping to breach the Indian's broken defense. His slashing blow to Gato Negro's head missed. Now he unsheathed his knife, hoping to enhance his power to kill.

With a sudden burst of rage Gato Negro charged. He didn't miss, the stone head slammed across Daniger's forearm. The momentarily paralyzing blow almost caused Daniger to drop his war club. He retreated and fought off Gato Negro's flurry of blows with an arm which ached with every movement.

The Netdahe didn't act like a man who had been sorely hurt. And that fact made Daniger a little apprehensive.

For a second, Gato Negro eyed Constanza and Daniger knew he meant to fulfill his promise and kill her. Almost at the instant the Apache raced for the rock pile, Daniger sprinted behind him. His limbs felt leaden, alien to his body; fatigue began to overtake him, the thing he most feared.

As Gato Negro scrambled up the rock pile Daniger was glad his height gave him an advantage. He aimed a blow at the Apache's head but the strike fell short, catching him between the shoulder blades. Gato Negro exhaled a grunt of pain, claw-

ing the rocks to retain his hold.

Only after Daniger scaled to the top of the rocks did he realize he might have finished the Netdahe. But it was too late. Freeing Constanza was more important then. Reaching the girl he severed the leather thongs binding her. Angry cries arose from the Netdahe's followers and he expected to be cut down with the girl in a fusillade of bullets.

"Run, *muchacha!* Run crooked to my friends."

She slid down the boulders and hit the ground.

Armed with his war club Gato Negro started in pursuit of Constanza. Daniger leaped down, confronting the Apache, blocking his way. The jolt staggered him and Gato Negro's club cut a wide arc. He ducked but the stone head pounded his chest, exploding spasms of pain, robbing him of breath. He spurted pain in big bursts, sucking needed air.

Gloating, the Netdahe caught up with him as he stumbled in retreat. Even as he tried to escape the blows, he heard rifles cocking.

With a quick sidelong glance he glimpsed the girl running toward Golinka. They're going to shoot her, he thought. Then he heard Golinka shout, "Don't shoot the Nakai squaw—the Mexicano girl means nothing. Don't violate the code."

Not a shot sounded and Daniger sighed in relief.

In the seconds which those things happened, Daniger still attempted to regain his strength. He backed away from Gato Negro's attack warding off as best he might, with blows of his own, the slashing, clubbing chops delivered by the Apache. Each breath was like a knife lacerating his lungs. His knees felt wobbly and he wondered how long it would be before his legs collapsed like broken reeds.

All of a sudden Daniger was stopped with his back against the pile of rocks. There was no place to go. At that instant the outcome of the battle might well be determined.

Watching the Netdahe's eyes, he guessed correctly and spun away from a hammering blow of the war club. The stone head hit the rocks and the leather sling covering the head now con-

tained particles of broken stone. In frustration, Gato Negro threw the ruined club at Daniger. The handle grazed his cheek and a warm trickle started down his cheek.

Gato Negro's knife glinted in the sunlight as he maneuvered for a thrust. Daniger aimed at the darting blade, striking right and left, up and down. The Apache toe-danced, the knife blade licking everywhere. Whirling his war club, the stone head taut in its sling, Daniger cracked Gato Negro's knuckles. His fingers opened spasmodically and the knife dropped. He was unarmed and sudden dismay showed. Then Gato Negro with a madness inspired by hate, threw himself at Daniger. Daniger's blow missed, sliding off the Apache's shoulder. Gato Negro gripped both of his wrists and they fell together, with the Indian straddling him.

Locking his feet in Daniger's legs, the Netdahe kept him from dislodging his telling weight. Gato Negro strived to bend his wrists, to flatten his arms on the ground. He couldn't roll the Apache over. With the burden of the Apache's weight, excruciating pains filled his chest. Clamping his teeth together Daniger thrust hard at Gato Negro's chest. But the Indian's strength was too much to overcome. He couldn't break either hand from the tight hold on them.

Gato Negro worked his hand upward till he clasped the head of the war club. He yanked and twisted, hoping to get the club or to tear lose the stone and smash Daniger's head with it.

Martin Daniger felt his strength ebbing. The fight couldn't long continue. A desperate scheme occurred to him. If it failed, well—

He released the club. The Netdahe went off balance for an instant, holding the club by its stone head. Daniger broke his grip and lunged with his knife. Too late Gato Negro tried to stop the driving blade and when it sank into his belly to the hilt, his own hand held the knife. The Netdahe looked down at Daniger in disbelief. And Daniger, with the histrionics he could convey, bestowed on Gato Negro an expression of scorn: that which his kind is want to show a dying enemy.

Gato Negro opened his mouth, perhaps to speak his dying hatred, but clots of blood gagged him. Daniger threw him off and sat up gazing at the dying Apache for a few seconds.

The dead Netdahe's men and those following Golinka moved forward to witness how the Apache died. The results were already known to them. They didn't hurry and the gait they adopted measured the grim finality of the fight.

Daniger reached for his .45-70 Winchester and Golinka without a word gave him the gun. The Mescalero understood that nobody might offer him help. Martin Daniger was the victor but that fact had to remain stamped in the minds of the young Apaches. Courage and strength won for him in the battle: He meant to depart with those qualities. In particular those young men recruited by the Netdahe must recognize no weakness in him.

With the stock of his gun on the ground Daniger pushed himself to his feet. He felt weak and unsteady but he faced the young Apaches.

The dead Apache's men stared down at their fallen chief with marked sullenness and a hint of humiliation. Afterwards each in his turn looked at the white man who slayed the Mexicano Apache. Daniger knew they asked themselves if he deserved the epithet of viejo.

Then Golinka spurned the corpse with a sharp kick. "Bury the boastful Netdahe in some secret place so that none shall know such a great fool lived."

Once again they gazed at Gato Negro's remains, holding their rifles as so many useless tubes of steel. Then one of the Apaches kicked the body while another spat on it; at last they beat the corpse with their guns and started firing wildly into what was left of the Netdahe. Savage rage swept them and they abused the corpse of the Indian who betrayed their dreams of glory.

Daniger expected such a violation of the Netdahe's body. It was the way of the Apache with his strange notions of life and death: strange to white men, even to himself.

"Soon they'll be back in the present, Golinka," he said.

Lumbering alongside of Golinka, headed for the downhill levels of stony steps, Daniger's chest felt caved in, lashed with terrible pains. Seth Barlow caught Daniger's arm, his breathing impaired now with excitement.

"You're one hell of a fighter, Mr. Daniger."

Constanza came apace with them. She looked up at him, walking swiftly to keep his face before her. At last she folded her cool hand in his.

"I thought I knew you—you're Martin Daniger. To think of it happening again. *Madre de Dios.* Six years ago, you saved me from the same *bronco* Apache. What can a girl say to a man who has twice saved her life? . . . *Gracias?* It's not enough."

Daniger smiled wearily. How could he explain to her that there was more involved than saving her life?

"I'll take you home, muchacha, if you don't mind the company of an old outlaw."

It appeared that, for the first time, she noticed his bloody shirt front and stared, her eyes wide with horror.

"You're hurt, you're hurt badly, Mr. Daniger."

"Nothing a doctor can't fix."

"Yes. We'll take you to a doctor, then you'll come home with me—to see my parents. They'll be so happy and—and grateful," she rattled on. "You will do that, won't you, Mr. Daniger?"

It was almost as if nothing important had occurred till shouts of rage went up from the dead Netdahe's followers, venting their rage with final mutilation of the corpse. Daniger knew that his past was gone forever. And in a few minutes those outraged Apaches would have done with a past in their lives.

They reached the rocky descent and Golinka beckoned to his men; two braves rushed forward to support Daniger. They attained the first elevation of rock and Golinka was beside Daniger.

"The past is dead, my brother. It is well."

Daniger knew the present was real and a man must live in his time and not yearn for ashes.

JACKRABBIT

By S. Omar Barker

Jackrabbits are a speedy crew,
Their running mostly leaping.
They do a lot of scratching, too,
But probably little sleeping.

Up jumps a jack and off he flees
With agile animation.
He seems inclined to fan the breeze
With little motivation.

Long ears like sails upon a mast,
A brief tail on his bottom–
They say what makes him flee so fast
Is fleas–because he's got 'em!

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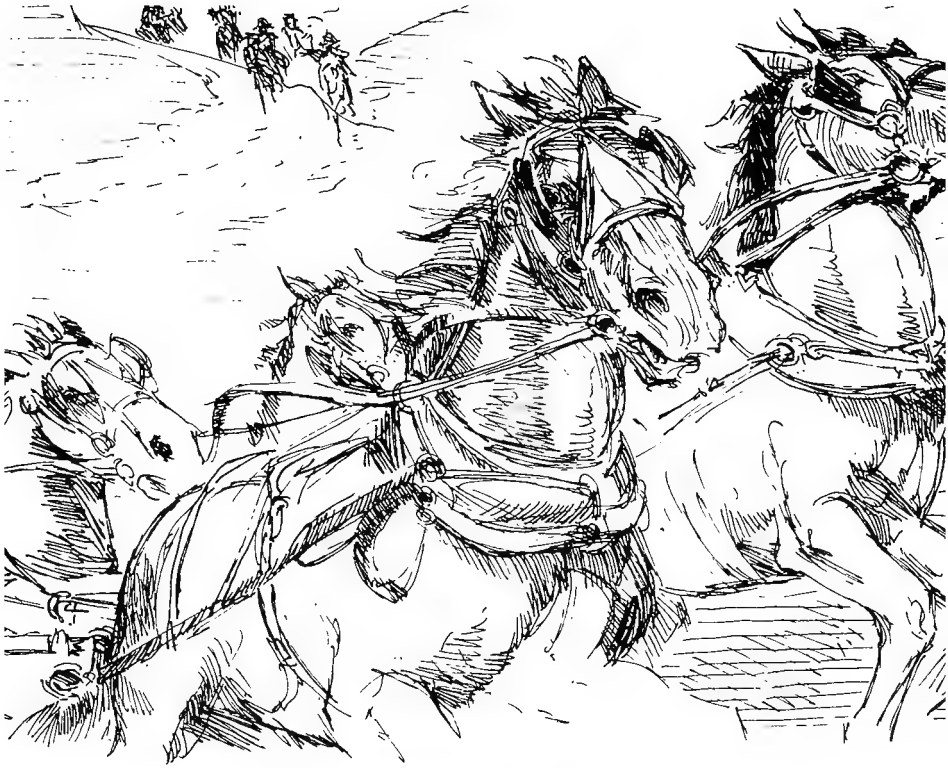
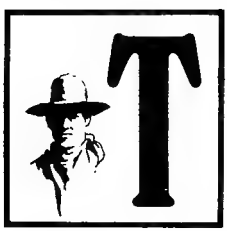


REUNION

By Randolph Newman



The stagecoach was crossing Taylor's Wash when the driver spotted five riders on the bluff. "Heeyah!" he brayed and snapped the reins hard. The well-trained team responded, hoofbeats thundering. As the guard raised his rifle to his shoulder one of the big spoked wheels crashed against a boulder, splintered and flew off. With a jolt the axle hit the dry streambed and the coach began to slow. The men on the bluffs opened fire.

A few minutes before noon on that blustery October day, Jake Sheridan was rinsing whitewash from his hands in prepa-

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ration for the midday meal. From the time he'd been sworn in as sheriff a few days ago, he'd been putting the finishing touches on the new office and jail annex. It nestled the new town hall, completed last summer just in time for statehood day. With a population of over nine hundred, a copper mine just outside the city limits and a stop on the Grand Junction mail run, Bantree had gone respectable. And the good folks of the town felt Jake Sheridan was the man to keep it that way.

Through freshly puttied glass that had been packed in over the mountains from Denver, Jake had a sweeping view north up Main Street. Only last month Main had dead-ended at the town hall, but new roads to the right and left had been cleared and were lined with fledgling businesses. The town was growing fast. Jake watched masons lay down their trowels and carpenters leave their studs and joists for the noon break. He toweled off and basked in quiet pride as he gazed up the busy street.

Way off to the north where Main Street wasn't even a thought, something caught Jake's eye—a cloud of dust among the brittlebush, growing nearer by the moment. A rider, thought Jake, or maybe two hellbent and heading this way.

Johnny Gerlach nearly collided with the sheriff as he barged in. "Coffee on?" he demanded. Weasle-faced Johnny wasn't always the most pleasant man to work with, but the lanky deputy had guts. Jake pointed up the street, his right hand resting on the black hardwood butt of his Colt. "Cone on," he said and the two lawmen stepped outside to meet the rider.

A dirt-streaked Mexican kid dismounted at a half gallop. Men still at work stopped to stare at the worn-out, pint-sized figure and his exhausted pony.

"Muertos! Muertos!"

"Hold on kid, slow down," Jake said. He gently placed his big hands on the boy's shoulders. "Dead ones? Where?"

"El coche! The . . . the stagecoach!" he jabbered, pointing to the north. "Un hombre, he lives, hurt bad! I can do nothing to help him."

"Johnny, get Doc Nelson. How far, son?"

"I ride fast. It is at the big dry river."

Jake had no trouble rounding up a posse from among the curious bystanders. A dozen men were eager to break the day's routine and get in on the excitement.

Doc Nelson was tamping his pipe mixture when Johnny knocked at the front door. Doc struck a light off the arm of his big oak office chair and Mrs. Nelson winced as if he'd struck the match off her. The good doctor's long-suffering wife had pinched features and a hawkish beak that belied her compassionate nature. Doc lit the pipe and a familiar foul odor, which Johnny had once described as "burning alfalfa that's already been through the cow," began to fill the room. Mrs. Nelson let Johnny in.

"Howdy, Ma'am. Got a job for you, Doc. Man hurt over at Taylor's Wash."

Mrs. Nelson mumbled a pleasantry and left the room. Johnny didn't blame her. Doc's "special smoking mixture" was abhorred by all. The pains he took to guard the secret recipe were entirely unnecessary.

"O.K., Johnny Boy," Doc said, rising. "Lead the way."

The posse found the Grand Junction stage lying on its side. The team and cargo were gone. The driver and guard would never drive or guard again. The bodies of two passengers lay near them on the ground, brutally peppered with rifle fire. Pinned under the coach was another man, shot, broken but breathing. He'd been spared by a boulder that had caught the toppled vehicle and held it, but he was stuck tight as a chuckwalla lizard puffed up between rocks in the desert. The men rigged up a team and pulled the heavy stagecoach from the unconscious man.

"Hoist him up, boys," said the doctor. "There's nothing I can do for him here. Anybody know him?" The men looked at one another and shrugged.

Jenkins, a rancher who had been in town for supplies, spoke up. "Sheriff, who coulda done it? Never been a stage holdup round here."

"That's cause there never been a stage round here!" snapped Johnny.

As they rode, the men exchanged theories. "Could Injuns ajumped the reservation mebbe and come north?"

"Nah, this ain't their style. Any hardcases in the area? How 'bout Baxter?"

"In jail. Where's Tovelles these days?"

"Down Sonora way. Couldn't be him."

"The Culver boys! Meaner outlaws never breathed."

"They ain't breathin' no more. Ain't you heard? Wiped out. To the last man. Went after a U.S. government train, down New Mexico Territory."

"You're awful quiet, Jake," Doc Nelson said softly as the two men rode abreast. "What's on your mind?"

"Doc . . ." Jake began quietly.

Doc cocked his head towards the still form slumped over the sorrel mare behind them. "You know him, don't you?"

"Never could hide much from you, Doc."

"Tell me about him" and Doc Nelson reached to his waist-pouch for his pipe.

The man's name was Tom Garvin and neither the bushy hair and beard nor the passing years could disguise that face from Jake Sheridan. They'd been neighbors back in Caldwell, Kansas. "Bleeding Kansas" it was called then. The Garvins, like the Sheridans and so many others, had come to the rich, clean prairies in search of a better life. Behind them Jake's folks had left the ice-glazed dirt-poor rocks of northern Vermont; the Garvins the hard-scrabbling valleys of the Georgia hill country. The two boys Jake and Tom were not close, they nodded to one another in passing. For a few short months they attended the same school and might have become friends. But there were strange words in the air, words like "compromise," "abolition," "state's rights," "secession," and suddenly these weren't just words any more.

One day Jake's dad came home from town bruised and bloody. He'd been at the saloon with friends, and Tom Garvin

Sr. had been there with his friends. Words had passed, fists flew and Mr. Sheridan wouldn't say more about it than that.

That night young Tom snuck over to the Sheridan farmhouse and tossed a handful of pebbles against the window of the room where Jake and his younger brothers slept. Jake came out alone, all fired up to fight the bigger boy.

But Tom wasn't there to fight. He had been at the saloon that afternoon and seen what had happened. He had come to tell Jake his own dad was wrong; Mr. Sheridan had been outnumbered. His father and his friends had ganged up on him; it was cowardly. Mr. Sheridan had been talking Yankee stuff but he had backed what he said with courage, and Tom was real sorry about it. And Tom had also come to say goodbye, maybe forever. States were seceding; Sumter had been fired upon. An army was being assembled across the line in Missouri and Tom Garvin, seventeen, was casting his lot with the Confederacy.

"I thanked him and wished him well. We shook hands and he was gone. Daddy . . . well, he just never seemed to heal up. A month later he was dead."

Doc took a long thoughtful draught from his pipe. "And that's the last you saw of Tom Garvin?"

"Four years later I was captured in Virginia. Behind Rebel lines, out of uniform. They called me a Yankee spy. And that's what I was. I was brought before the colonel. It was March, 1865. Petersburg had fallen. In a few days Richmond would be put to the torch. The Cause was lost. But I was a spy and I was to be hung at dawn.

"I spent what was to be my last night in a tiny wooden stockade. Just before sunup I heard a man send the guard away. I thought it was my time. The man walked into my cell. A young lieutenant."

"Lieutenant Tom Garvin."

"Uh huh. He handed me a lit cigarette. He said, 'Saw them bring you, Jake. The war is lost. The South will never be the same. And Tom Garvin will never be the same.' And he walked out. He left the door open. There was a horse standing there,

saddled up. Tom just walked towards the officers' quarters. I rode like hell."

"He saved your life."

Jake nodded. They had arrived at Bantree. The patient was brought to Doc's house. Jake and Johnny waited in the outer parlor; they knew Doc liked to work alone. A half hour passed before he emerged from his treatment room.

"He'll live, Jake. Bullet missed the heart by, oh, a flea's leg or so. Tore away some muscle and fat and passed through, clean as you please."

"So the varmints left a witness," offered Johnny.

Doc shrugged. "Most likely wore masks," he said, preparing his pipe. "Our boy here was lucky when the stage fell on him. I count three cracked ribs, some bruises." He lit up and the foul smoke poured from his mouth, nose and, it seemed, eyes and ears.

Back in his office Jake smoked a hand-rolled and paced. Four men were dead and the only survivor was a specter from a time he'd like to leave behind him forever. The telegraph from Grand Junction brought more bad news: The stage had been carrying a special cash consignment for delivery to the Bantree bank—five thousand dollars. There had been only two passengers, both mining executives.

"You can talk to him now." Jake turned with a start to face Doc Nelson. "He's fuzzy but rational."

"Did he say anything? What did he say?"

" 'Awful'. "

"Huh?"

"I asked him how he felt and he said, 'Awful'."

"Oh." Jake glanced about the office and adjacent cells. "Johnny!" he called. "Where the hell is Johnny?"

Doc shrugged.

"Never mind it. Let's go." Jake tramped out. It took some effort for the round little doctor to keep up with his long strides as they crossed the street and walked the short block to the Nelson home.

"Hope the missus gets back soon," said Doc conversationally as they stepped onto the front porch. "I'm getting hungry."

"You left him alone?"

"Why not?" They walked through the stuffy parlor. Doc went to the curtained partition which shielded a cot he kept for resting patients. "Mr. Garvin," he said softly. "There's someone to see you." He drew aside the curtains. The empty cot glowed in a dusty ray of late sun slanting through the window.

Sheridan's Colt was out. He leaped across the parlor, through the treatment room and out the back door which led to a dusty courtyard and a small corral. He bounded onto the plank walkway that crossed the yard as Garvin was hoisting himself onto Doc's mount. He was up in the saddle before Jake could reach him. Jake hesitated; Garvin picked up the reins. Jake was ready to spring when Garvin seemed to go limp. He slowly slid from the horse and collapsed in a heap, as if the air had been let out of him. Dust billowed and Garvin was still.

Jake holstered the gun. Doc appeared.

"Why, the bastard tried to steal my new rifle!" he said, a little out of breath.

"Not to mention your horse, Doc. Give me a hand."

"Good thing he fainted," Doc said as they carried him inside. "Might have lost him for good. Look here, he's hemorrhaged."

"I want you to tend him over at the jail."

Garvin awoke in a cell with the doctor's chubby face looming over him.

"Thief," Nelson muttered and turned to Sheridan. "He's with us again."

Jake walked over from the adjacent office. Johnny sat down at Jake's desk, leaned back, put his feet up and listened.

Jake gazed into the prisoner's gray-green eyes, cloudy stagnant pools on gritty desert-hewn skin. The whole was framed by springy coal-black hair that flowed in vibrant waves. Where the ebony mane ended and the beard and mustache began could not be pinpointed. The puddle eyes, after a moment, began to

freeze into the hard look of a man to be reckoned with and Jake knew without a word that he too had not gone unremembered.

"Why . . . why'd you try to run, Tom?" Jake was unable to say anything more.

"Run?" the wounded man said. "Run? Can't remember . . ."

"Why'd you steal my rifle?" Doc Nelson piped up. "You . . . you ungrateful saddle bum!"

"Shut up, Doc. Listen . . . Tom . . . what happened on the stage?"

"Stage? Stage . . ."

"The Grand Junction stage! Listen, you didn't get on there. You flag it down? Horse go lame on you, maybe?"

"That's it. He had to shoot him . . . walked for miles." The eyes closed. "Ditches . . . miles . . ."

"So you flagged down the stage. Then what happened? Tom! The robbery . . .?"

"Ditches, the deep ditches . . . holding Petersburg . . . Yankee cannon, day and night, tryin' to blow us up . . . the cannon . . ."

"Doc! He's delirious!"

Doc stepped in quickly, checked his patient. "Not any more," he announced. "He's fainted again."

Jake Sheridan was a rigid man and did not deal well with the irrational.

"What are we gonna do, Doc? He's gone crazy!"

"Patience, Jake, patience. He's a strong man. See what the morning brings."

The next afternoon Johnny brought in the broth Mrs. Nelson had sent over.

"Hungry, war hero?"

Garvin sat up.

"Ready to tell us why you tried to run off with Doc's horse?" Johnny extended the steaming bowl, then drew it away. "Huh, war hero? *Reb* war hero! *Reb war hero horse thief!*"

"Johnny!" The deputy turned with a start. Jake had returned

from the Nelsons' and was standing over him. "*I* ask the damn questions 'round here!"

"I was just feedin' the horse thief! Heck, even Reb horse thieves gotta eat."

"You been out to McKenner's 'bout that missing stock? I thought not. Git!" Johnny sauntered out.

"Well, Tom, you're looking better."

Garvin nodded. "Gainin' some of my strength back every hour."

"How 'bout your memory?"

"Jake, it's like I told you this mornin', got on board somewheres south of Ouray. Ridin' along at a pretty good clip. Hit the wash, team speeds up, we crash. That's the whole I remember till this morn."

"Don't remember sneaking out back of Doc's?"

Garvin shook his head. "Jake, am I a prisoner?"

"Well," Jake said thoughtfully. "Doc says it's possible getting hurt like that can mess up a man's thinking. I seen it myself before during the war. Lotsa fellows went nuts . . . uh, temporarily, or course."

"Then I'm free to go?"

"Well . . . yeah. 'Course you've gotta take it real easy for a while."

Garvin rose stiffly to his feet. "Taped sides is worse than the bullet hole. Taken plenty of slugs in my day but never a broke bone, ever. Where's my gun?"

Jake nodded in the direction of the office. "Peg on the wall, by the door." They walked over to it together. "Say, you planning on staying in Bantree?"

Garvin shrugged. "Maybe. Just might ride out to old man McKenner's later this week, see if he's takin' on any winter help. If not, there's always the mine. Folks say Bantree's a town with a future."

"You're welcome to stay here till you get your strength back. I know it's not fancy, but . . ."

"I got a little money, Jake. Thanks the same." Garvin

strapped on his gunbelt. The well-oiled crossdraw holster held a gleaming .44 Colt.

"Bantree Inn's as good a hotel as any in west Colorado." Jake pointed. "Right up the street."

"Thanks. I'll give it a try." They stood in the doorway. Tom put out his hand. "Funny meetin' up like this after all these years, huh, Jake?"

"Yeah, Tom. You take care." They shook and Garvin walked out. "Sure is funny," Jake muttered as he watched Garvin amble up the street. Johnny barged in.

"I'll be leavin' fer McKenner's now, Jake."

Jake didn't hear. He was eyeing Garvin through the north-facing window. Garvin strolled past the hotel without pausing and turned into Johnson's Livery.

"Johnny," Sheridan said softly, "I've got a real funny feeling." He took the .44-40 Winchester off the rack on the wall, checked the action and rummaged through his desk until he found the box of cartridges. He pointed to the pantry. "Grab us some beans and jerky," he said, and began rounding up other supplies and stuffing them into his range sack. He jerked his head in the direction of the window. "Look out. Tell me what you see."

"I see Garvin ridin' thisa way, 'bout as quick as a man can this time 'a day through the middle 'a town without gettin' himself arrested."

Jake nodded. "Get ready to ride."

Garvin was a shrinking silhouette against the bleeding evening sky when the two lawmen paused at the outskirts of town.

"He's heading for the tablelands. We stay back far as we can. He stops, we head for cover. I'm hoping he won't be expecting us, so he won't be looking."

"Looks like he's broken, Jake. He's pushin' that mount."

"The southwest pass. Well, we know where he is for the next five miles or so. By the time . . ." Jake whirled in his saddle at the sound of hoofbeats behind him. "What the hell . . .?"

"Doc!" Johnny shouted in amazement.

Panting, the corpulent Nelson, an accomplished rider, reined

even with them. "Saw Garvin leave town," he announced.

"So?"

"So you're too good a lawman not to smell a rat and tail him."

"Yeah, but what do we need *you* for?"

"Johnny, my boy, would you rather ride into possible danger *without* a man of medicine at your side?"

"Ah, he'll spot three of us fer sure!"

"Perhaps not, my young friend. You see, I believe he has a very definite destination in mind and if we just . . ."

"Quit flapping your jaws, will you?" Jake interrupted gruffly. "Just keep your eyes open."

They rode as sundown faded to dusk.

"Look there, he's stopped." Jake pulled out his old military field glasses and trained them on the speck high above them to the southwest. "He's making camp. Let's get out of sight."

They reined up behind some low sandstone bluffs. "Maybe he don't know these hills well enough to move after dark," Johnny ventured.

"Or maybe he's feeling the strain," said Doc.

"Yeah," Jake agreed. "Not an easy climb for man or horse, Let's see about settling in. Easy now, no noise."

It was a miserable night. Frigid gusts of grit-bearing wind scudded down the slopes into their camp. They did not dare a fire and Garvin's, a mile away and a thousand feet up, taunted them, like a warm hearth seen through a cold glass door forever closed. They slept in shifts, fitfully, cursing the early cold spell and partaking gratefully of Doc's carefully rationed "special medicine," which was simply cheap brandy.

At last dawn snuffed the countless lanterns in the inky moonless sky and the men rose to attend another plateau sunrise. The vermillion eye peered shyly, at first, over the eastern rims, then popped up to set the rock walls ablaze.

Without pausing for breakfast Garvin broke camp. He had selected a powerful steed, but could not drive it as he wished. Hard riding sent spears of pain through the bullet-gouged tunnel

in his upper chest and the dull ache of his cracked and tightly bound ribs would not let up. He tried to shift his thoughts to other things but that just seemed to move the pain to his head, and there was an almost constant ringing in his ears. Several times noises that seemed not of the desert drifted to him and he would stop to listen. Could it be the sound of horsemen far below? Or just an animal in the ever-thickening brush? Behind him were only the rocks and the scrub, and the dancing of the wind-blown pinyon was all the motion his weary eyes could pick out.

By noon they had crossed into Utah Territory and Garvin was heading for higher country still. The following day the stunted juniper and rabbitbrush of the slickrock country were far behind. Tom shielded his eyes against the pale sun, searching the upper ledges. His gaze fell on the high granite outcropping where the trail doubled back on itself. He made a conscious effort to relax and gather his strength while scanning the forest in all directions. Below him, among the Bristlecone Pine and Blue Spruce, he saw movement.

The Colt was out of his holster before another thought could form. The three riders stopped and scattered among the trees and out of sight. They're tailing me, Garvin realized. And after a moment he knew who *they* were.

What a fool thing it had been to try to sneak out of Doc's place! He had tipped his hand; they had seen some of the cards. And now they wanted to see the rest. He had no quarrel with Jake or the others, especially Jake. But it was too late to try to throw them now. The cabin was just around the bend and up the rise. But Jake wouldn't come all this way just to talk. Jake would wait, see what he was up to. And that was all that counted, that Jake sit tight for a while. Tom wouldn't need much time. Maybe no time at all, a day or two at most. After that, Tom told himself, he didn't give a damn what happened.

How could they have gotten this far? When Tom Garvin needs two days to spot a three-man tail, he thought, it's time to go into a different line of work.

Jake unwrapped the strap of his binoculars from his saddle horn. "He's letting his horse go." On the high granite ledge where man and horse stood against the sky, Garvin's palomino wandered out of sight into a flat grassy meadow. Garvin trudged up the narrow face of the cliff, then rounded the outcropping and vanished.

Jake dismounted and uncoiled a long tether for the horses. "There's pasture here."

"We're actually going to walk up that?" asked Doc.

"Yep, and the sooner the better." Jake scanned the cliffside with the field glasses again. "I see only one way up from here. Hoist those bags. Let's move."

Half an hour later they reached the turn in the trail. Jake pulled his gun and signalled for caution. With his back pressed against the rock he edged his way along the blind switchback and disappeared.

As he rounded the bend the small sturdy log house came into view. It stood at the crest of a gentle slope and was flanked on all sides by huge Douglas firs. The cabin faced south; Jake was looking at its front door.

To his right he could see another trail that climbed the mountain from the east. It was a ribbon that seemed to wind through the forest for dozens of miles. An ocean of green stretched until giant evergreens were as blades of grass. The dust on the far horizon, Jake knew, hung suspended over the mesa country they had left two days earlier. It was with reluctance that he tore himself from the magnificent view.

To his left for about a hundred feet the land was flat and strewn with giant granite boulders. They would offer concealment with the cabin still in view. They would also provide a windbreak and, Jake thought grimly, cover from rifle fire. He examined the cabin carefully through his binoculars and detected movement at the front window. Garvin was cutting a firing hole in the parchment windowpane. Jake waited until Garvin was out of sight, then went back for his companions.

Garvin threw his pack onto the plank table with a sigh. It

had been a long haul for a man in his condition. He surveyed the room. Nothing had changed. The old 12-gauge hung next to the tattered serape on the wall by the stone fireplace. He got the shotgun down, found shells, loaded both barrels and placed it within easy reach. Little light filtered through the sheepskin stretched over the two window openings that faced south and east, but Tom dared not light the kerosene lamp. And it wasn't because of Jake that he kept the cabin dark.

The cabin had been built for long winter stays. Tom went to the small top-hinged door set into the back wall. It led to the woodbox, which extended about four feet out past the north wall and ended in another upward-swinging door to the outside. The woodbox was just high and wide enough for a man to crawl through. Tom and the boys had always kept it nearly empty for just that purpose—another exit. Now Tom set about attaching some twine to the inside of the outer door, stretching it so that anyone raising the door would pull on it. He then hung two iron skillets and tied them so that a change in the tension of the twine would cause one skillet to strike the other. He didn't have to try it, he knew it would work.

He worked with haste. Tin plates with the remains of three pounds of frijoles sat on the table, the beans cold and hard but unspoiled. The boys had been here and would be back. He knew the pattern so well. Strike to the east, cool off for a few days, then hit north—Green River, maybe, or Moab, where there was plenty of Mormon money for the taking. Then circle back and hide out here a while. It was a craving, this thing, like morphine, the soldier's sickness. But Tom had had enough.

"The last one," he'd told Manny. "Then it's each man for himself." Tom. . .? he'd put his money in a little spread, maybe down along the Texas Gulf where winters were warm and people looked at the world the way he did. Manny and the others? Hell, they'd probably get their throats cut over some senorita in an Arizona bawdyhouse—Tom didn't care. Only it hadn't worked out that way. It hadn't worked out that way at all.

Doc Nelson peered through the trees. "Man could hole up in that cabin for some time," he mused. "Could be a long wait."

"No one invited you," reminded Johnny.

"He's waiting for someone," said Jake. "And it's a surprise."

"Uh huh. No horse, no fire."

"I say we go in and get him!"

"And then what, Johnny Boy?"

"And then," Johnny pounded a fist against an open palm, "get the truth out of him."

"Save your energy," Jake advised. "Look at the sky. Clouding up fast. Winds north, northeast. We're gonna need some shelter. Work quick now, and work quiet."

The ugly purple clouds piled up but seemed unwilling to part with more than a few gusts and a brief hourly flurry. It was as if the sky was waiting too. The night was starless, and the next morning no sun rose to chase away the pre-dawn chill.

Johnny busied himself fashioning a rope snare with which he hoped to bag a marmot or a hare. Doc was engrossed in a dime novel about the "Wild West." Jake watched. He watched the cabin, the trails, the forests, the cabin again.

Doc put the book down and addressed Johnny. "How are you going to cook him without smoke?"

Garvin felt awful. If they didn't show soon he was done for and he knew it. His head was heavy from a long, cold, sleepless night. His stomach was queasy from the raw coffee beans he'd been chewing on to stay awake and his wound throbbed. Some jerky and the leftover beans improved things a little. He continued his vigil through the peepholes in the two windows. The sun was high and hidden behind a troubled sky when he saw them.

"Riders!" Jake pushed Doc roughly. "I said riders! On the east trail."

Four horsemen were bounding up the trail as if on a jaunt through the countryside. Jake put the box of cartridges within easy reach and trained his rifle sights on the riders. Johnny loaded the sixth bullet into his revolver and nervously spun the

cylinder. Doc put down his novel, careful to mark his place, and picked up his long-range Springfield rifle.

Garvin lay on the floor under the table. He too filled the one empty chamber of his Colt, then placed the pistol on the floor a few inches to his right. He took up the shotgun. The riders had reached the cabin and dismounted. Tom could hear their breezy chatter and laughter from behind the door. Footsteps sounded on the planks that served as a front porch. Something was said in Spanish. Garvin leveled the 12-gauge and aimed it at the door about five feet off the ground. He heard Manny's voice again, this time speaking English. Garvin cocked the weapon and braced himself for the kick. Danny Flanigan muttered a cheerful curse and opened the door.

Garvin let go with both barrels and Flanigan's head and upper body disappeared in a red pulp. He bucked once and flopped to the ground. The door slammed and the other three men hit the dirt. A heartbeat—then a staccato of bullets splintered the door as the gunmen fired blindly into the cabin. Bullets ripped into the heavy plank table and stopped. Others richocheted off walls and sped madly about the room. A lull . . . one second, two . . . and Garvin rolled to the right, putting the stone fireplace chimney between his body and the door. But all was quiet.

Manny sprang to his feet and yanked his rifle from the boot of his saddle. Keeping the horse between himself and the cabin, he dove for the safety of the nearby rocks and trees. The others, seeing there was no response from within, followed.

"Good God," gasped Doc. Johnny, not quite sure what to do, lifted his pistol above the stone barricade. At that moment the clouds overhead broke and for one instant the sun streamed through. Manny was scanning the hills, trying to collect himself and figure a course of action, when the errant sunbeam caught the tip of Johnny's highly polished weapon. The light glinted off the metal as if it had been a mirror.

"We are surrounded!" Manny screamed. Instinctual fighters, the men on the hill let loose a murderous fusilade towards the lawmen and the doctor, then fled farther into the trees.

As if on cue, the snow came, a wavering white curtain dropped from heaven to earth. The winds whipped it into a mad dance and seven men wondered if this was to be their last, magnificent sight.

"The storm," Manny said to his companions. "The storm, it is a blessing. Under its cover we can slip from the trap."

"Manny, yer fergettin' sumthin'." It was Bert Kaufman, the fast, light-stepping killer, who spoke. "The money's in there!"

"Well then, I suggest you go in and get it, my friend who is quick enough to dodge the flying bullets!"

"Awright, listen," snarled Kaufman. "I'm gonna try 'round back. Whoever's down the hill that's quiet fer now. I think maybe we got 'em or scared 'em good. So y'all jest pump lead at that bastard in there who did in Danny. You keep 'im too busy to fart and' I'll go teach him some manners."

Under cover of falling snow Kaufman sprinted in a wide arc around the side of the cabin. The well-armed outlaws blasted away. To Garvin, hugging the fireplace wall, the storm seemed to be spitting bullets through the door and windows. Kaufman reached the woodbox and dropped to his belly. He cocked his pistol and, with a cat burglar's touch, lifted the door.

Through the din of the gunfire a different sound reached Garvin. The skillets were banging together. He whirled and squeezed off three fast rounds into the firebox. The inner door exploded into shards. The skillets continued to clang. Garvin fired until the hammer clicked on hollow cylinders. The frying pans continued to swing until they lost momentum, like a pendulum, and hung still. The firing outside ceased.

"Good Lord," said the Doc. "They're going to turn that boy into Swiss cheese."

Jake said, "I can't let Tom die like that."

"Seems to be doin' all right so far," said Johnny.

"Well Jake, what now?"

"I'm not sure, Doc."

"I say we wait. Can't get a clear shot at those bandidos and sure is no use firing at the cabin." And Doc began digging in his

sack for his pipe.

"I'll tell you what *I'm* gonna do!" said Johnny, leaping to his feet. "I'm gettin' closer. Can't see a damned thing in this snow."

"Johnny! No!" But he had already disappeared into the swirling white.

"Doc, just wait here . . . but not too long, get me?" There was terror in Jake's voice. It made the last ounce of Doc's cool reserve drain out as if someone had pulled a plug. Jake vanished into the storm and fear filled the pit of Doc's stomach. With trembling fingers he uncorked the brandy bottle and breathed a silent prayer for his friend. He shook his head and clumps of snow, loosened from his hat, tumbled to the ground. Composing himself he leaned back, rifle cradled in the crook of his arm, and cocked his head, listening. But there were no sounds of gunplay. Just the soft swish of floating snow and the reedy moan of the wind.

Jake was stealing towards the crouching shape not ten yards ahead of him. The fresh powder did not crunch beneath his boots. He aimed his revolver at the man's head. The form was motionless, unaware. Now the muzzle of Jake's Colt was two feet away, then six inches. He cocked the pistol.

The man froze. The unmistakable click was as loud as if dynamite had gone off in his head. He was had. Johnny slowly raised both hands, let his gun drop to the snow. He turned to face his assassin.

"Oh lordy, it's you!" Johnny wanted to kiss him.

"See what a fool thing it was to go off alone?" But Jake could not hide his relief.

Johnny took a deep breath and stood tall. "Ah, how can anyone fight in a snowstorm. You know what I think, Jake? I think . . ."

A shot rang out and Johnny dropped, his mouth still open. There was a little red hole in his temple. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Johnny's killer materialized twenty feet away. The gunman hesitated; he hadn't seen *two* men there. Jake instantly pumped three bullets into his chest.

Jake was weary. If I could only get to the cabin . . . surely Tom knows there's another group of men outside . . . does he know it's me, Jake Sheridan, not an enemy? How long must we go on fighting in this blinding white hell?

Tom Garvin pulled the serape off its peg on the wall and wrapped it around him, taking care to cover most of his bronzed face and ebony hair. The cloak had been faded by many Sonoran summers into a pale cream, almost white. His light-colored hat, pulled low, completed the costume. He opened the front door a crack. There was nothing but the swirling white. Glancing around the cabin, his eyes rested on the iron skillets that had saved his life. He went to the woodbox and pulled the body out, then picked up the heavier skillet and hurled it with all his might against the small door at the end of the crawlway. The door gave. Three bullets blasted through the opening and bored into the south wall.

"That's what I thought," he said to himself, and slipped out the front door. He was still taking a chance but it was better this way. The wind tried to snatch his garment away. He clutched it tightly with his left hand, unable to keep it from whipping wildly about. The other hand was filled with his .44 Colt. He fought his way into the gusts and around to the back of the cabin. There was Manny, crouching behind a windwarped pine.

Jake was making his way up from the left when he spotted Manny. He took aim.

"Manny!" Garvin shouted.

Jake froze at the sound of Garvin's voice. Manny responded by firing in the direction of the sound. He could see nothing but snow.

"You can't shoot me, Manny. You can't *see* me!"

"Garvin?" the outlaw croaked. "It *can't* be Garvin!"

"I'm no ghost. I lived! I lived for this moment." Garvin began to skip about, confident in his cloak of camouflage.

"The Grand Junction stage was finished, Manny. The men might have given up without a fight."

Manny dropped to his hands and knees and tried to scramble away. A bullet exploded in front of him, kicking an icy spray in his face.

"I said, 'Wait,' Manny. I said 'let 'em drop their weapons,' like before. But that wasn't your style anymore. They never had a chance. You shot 'em down."

"It was the others!"

"And then you shot me," Tom said calmly.

"Not I!" the terrified man screamed and fired into the storm.

"Why couldn't you have just le me quit?"

"You . . . you might have talked!"

"No . . . it wasn't that. It wasn't even for the extra share . . . You hated me for a long time . . ."

"Yes!" the desperate bandit shrieked. "I hated you!"

". . . because I could get what you couldn't and keep it. You hated me 'cause I wasn't like the others, the ones you could control . . . that's right, Manny, *you* gave the orders but *I* was the one in charge. And you feared me . . ."

"I fear you? I *kill* you, gringo bastard!" and he spent another cartridge into the blind storm.

"Oh yeah, you fear me. I saw it, plain as daylight . . . it was the last thing I saw, when you pushed that coach over on me. It was in your eyes . . . you were afraid, cause you knew one day it would have to come to this . . ."

Jake had heard enough. He shouted at the top of his lungs. "Tom! Tom, don't shoot! It's Sheridan!"

Garvin looked towards the sound. He could barely see a shadow, approaching cautiously. At that instant Manny turned to run and Tom promptly shot him dead.

"Tom! It's Jake! I'm coming in."

Garvin walked back to the cabin, went in and closed the front door behind him.

Jake called, "I'm coming in."

"Suit yourself."

Jake entered. Tom was gathering beans, salt pork and coffee and stuffing them in his sack.

"I'll tell what I heard, Tom. A jury will believe me. You won't hang for the murder of those men."

"You crazy? I ain't goin' to jail. Never again. I spent time in a cell before. March to May, 1865. I was in stockade, awaitin' trial. 'Course that never came about, what with the world fallin' apart.

"See, it was weeks after Appomattox and the boys had all gone home. They just plumb forgot about me. It was a four by six box. The last week or so there was no food or water. Yankee soldiers finally let me out."

"Tom, I . . ."

"You see, I was supposed to be courtmartialed. For deliberately freein' a Yankee spy."

"I . . . I'll never forget what you did . . ."

Tom stuffed the last of the food into his sack. "A bad year all around for me, Jake. The Yankees said I was nuts so they kept me locked up for a while too. Time I got back to Kansas was nothin' left of the homestead. Kiowas, Commanches, soldiers, what difference does it make?"

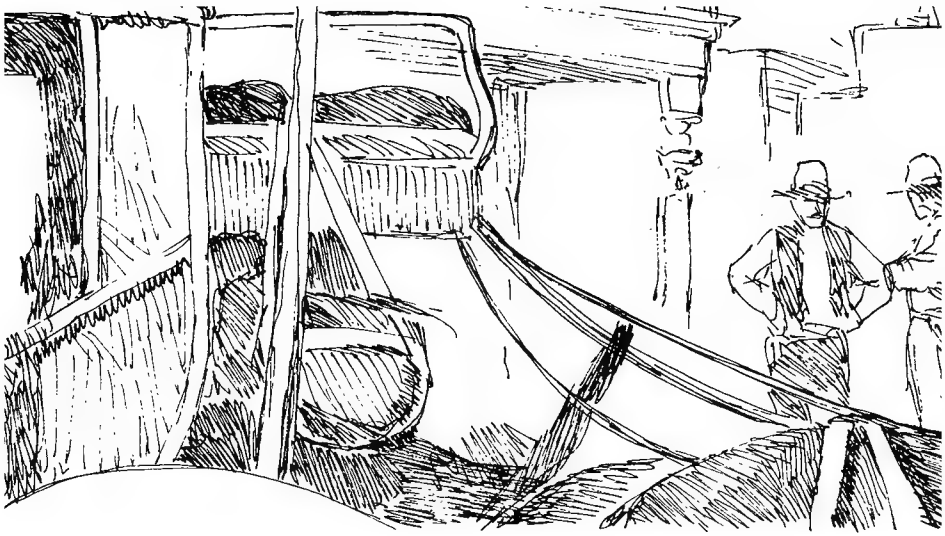
He picked up the bag of supplies and slung it over his shoulder. "So if you want me, you gonna have to shoot me in the back."

Tom opened the door. The storm was passing, the wind had died. Large snowflakes floated gently to earth.

Jake tried to bluff. "Don't go out there! Doc has instructions to shoot!"

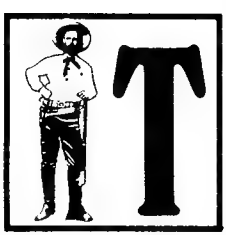
"Maybe. Don't really matter much now, does it?" Jake watched him disappear into the white.

Sheridan sighed and looked at the fireplace and the logs and kindling stacked beside it. The hell with it, he thought, I'll let Doc build the fire. He started down the hill to get him. No sense spending another night out in the cold.



RIVER FURY

By Stack Sutton



The driver pulled his team up for a breathing spell and Creed Weatherall stepped from the stage. Twelve thousand feet below Benbow's rooftops sparkled and Creed saw that the town formed a square around a large building he adjudged to be the courthouse. The driver shuffled over to stand beside him. He gave Creed a sideways glance, his gaze dipping to the ball-tipped star

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pinned to the lawman's linen shirt. "It ain't none of my business but, if I was you, I'd put that thing in my pocket."

"Wouldn't want to disappoint anybody. Might be some folks expecting me."

"That's why I'm telling you what I'm telling you." The driver added, "Four o'clock. One more hour will put us there," and turned to the stage.

Creed nodded. The driver had warned him, and this was unexpected. But he couldn't hide the star. He wanted Benbow to know the law had arrived. This country had been wide open for too long. Its people had lost respect for what he represented.

An hour's jostling brought him to Benbow. As the stage rattled up to the Wells Fargo office, fresh dust shifted onto Creed's clothing and an alkaline odor sullied the air. Carpetbag in hand, he alighted from the coach. As he hit the boardwalk a fat man hurried from the office. His eyes found the star fastened to Creed's shirt and his foot seemed to pause in midair as he slowed his pace.

Creed faced the square. The sun's dying rays ebbed in from the west. Those rays struck the star, bouncing yellow signals up and down the street. On the courthouse square, almost directly across from where Creed stood, three men stared over the clay road. Their gaze focused on the star and, as Creed returned their glance, they closed in loose huddle. Diagonally from the stage office a hefty fellow in a gray shirt and white apron walked from Knight's Dry Good store. His gaze found Creed, moved disinterestedly away, then slammed back to Creed's position as the situation registered.

Creed swung over the road, turned in another thoroughfare that a sign proclaimed to be North Street. Opposite the square a two-story saloon reared its weathered outline. The name, *Appomattox,* gleamed redly on the sun-baked walls. He had been briefed on this country, but had he been told nothing, the information gleaned from two saloons, the *Appomattox*, and *Jefferson Davis* would have told him everything.

Wheeling south, he marched by the feed store and Berry's

Apothecary. His route brought him to the intersection of North and Main and he crossed the road and entered the hotel.

"A room," Creed said.

The clerk hesitated, his eyes jumping from Creed to the ledger. He touched the ledger, fingering the binding, and Creed banged one big hand across the lined page. The clerk started to say something, then looked at the floor. "Guess I can find something."

Creed hiked over the lobby and climbing the single flight of stairs followed the hall to Number Eight. He dropped his bag and strolled to the two rear windows. One of them opened over an alley running between the hotel and an empty lot. The other looked down on a single story building's tar-papered roof. The room was small, hot and dirty.

Creed stripped down and, filling the wash basin, cleaned and shaved. He completed his toilet and, opening the carpetbag, drew out a fresh outfit. He slid into a linen shirt and a pair of broadcloth trousers. Dusting off his boots and Stetson, he strapped on his gunbelt. Then he carefully polished the star and pinned it in place. His clothing would attract attention and that was his idea. In his mind the law was different and apart and the man wearing the star should be different and apart.

The sound of hoofbeats drew him to the window. A group of riders pounded down North Street and reined up at the *Appomattox*. This bunch dismounted and swept inside, leaving the dust from their passage filtering the sun's last beams. From his vantage spot Creed could see all of Benbow, and he marked it off carefully in his mind. He noted the size of buildings, the number of stores, the way North Street rounded the overgrown lot behind the church to form a junction with the far end of South Street.

Thirty minutes later he had finished his supper and stood on the boardwalk fronting the hotel. Dusk settled over Benbow. The mingled smells of pine and spruce drifted from the hills and a breeze ruffled the dusty roadbed. More riders loped into town and pulled in at the *Appomattox*. To his right mounted men galloped down South Street. Word had spread, and this

country's inhabitants were coming in to see the new federal marshal.

CHAPTER TWO

Creed angled over the thoroughfare, heading for the *Appomattox*. Ahead light reached from the doorway to spot the walk with flickering shadows as a file of four men entered the saloon. Reaching the *Appomattox,* he paused momentarily, and gazed keenly at the town.

There was a shuffling noise to his rear and Creed swung around. A sun-darkened face under a gray hat stared at him over the *Appomattox's* swinging doors. He met that glance, held it, and the gray-hatted fellow eased back out of sight. Creed shouldered through the doorway, halting just inside, and punched tobacco into his pipe. These men were curious. He meant that they should have their chance to look him over.

He fired the pipe and strolled directly to the bar. He said, "Whiskey," and the barkeep set a bottle and glass before him.

Pouring two fingers, he downed the shot and tossed a quarter on the bar. He wheeled around and hooked a boot heel over the rail. The place was a rectangle with four windows denting the front wall. Tables were scattered in an uncertain arrangement. Creed counted eleven men at the tables.

He removed the pipe from his lips and let his muscular body sway against the bar. "My name is Weatherall. I've got a thousand dollars for the person who brings me information about the killers of Billy Riely and Ed Dale."

There was a vague rustling at the tables and one of the men at the bar said something Creed didn't understand. Creed waited and, when no one spoke, swung around and poured himself a second drink. The muttering started again; although he couldn't catch the words, he knew what these men were thinking. A thousand dollars was a lot of money. It would split this bunch into isolated segments and that was his plan.

Footsteps rammed on the outside walk. Through the mirror Creed saw the doors burst apart and three men halted just in-

side. The man in the lead held a shotgun while his followers spread to both sides and kept their hands on their revolvers.

All the men at the tables had whirled around and a redfaced fellow with brown hair jumped to his feet. "You know the rules, Hait. You people stay out of the *Appomattox*."

"To hell with your rules. Henry Strong's dead, and I'm not letting it ride. You damn Yanks have been pushing too hard. You know what I mean, Lance?"

The red-faced Lance's mouth formed a surprised zero. One of the ranchers at the bar said, "Good God!" and a chair screeched as someone pushed back from the tables. Creed kept his gaze on the mirror. The name Strong meant nothing, but the fact that Lance had stood up told him something he wanted to know.

Lance said, "I'm warning you."

Tip Hait laughed. "I wish I knew which one of you yellow polecats gunned Henry Strong. When I find out this is a sample of what you can look for." He threw the shotgun to his shoulder, fired, and a glass lamp hanging from the ceiling exploded in a shower of shattered particles.

As the gun rose to Hait's shoulder Creed spun around, but before he could interfere a pot-bellied fellow in denims and a flannel shirt appeared in the doorway. A sheriff's star hung from this man's shirt. "Hait, you know better than to be here. The agreement is for you boys to stay clear of the *Appomattox*. I won't stand for any trouble in Benbow."

"Henry Strong's been shot in the back."

The sheriff's lips pursed. He shook his head. "Settle it out of town. I don't want no trouble in Benbow."

Indecision marked Hait's gaze. He held his place, shotgun pointing skyward. The tension in the room was brittle enough to break. His gaze left the sheriff, crawled around the saloon and, for the first time, he noted Creed.

Creed felt dislike flare over his chest but he didn't allow this dislike to cloud his judgment. He recognized Hait as a shrewd individual and it had taken a lot of guts to come into this saloon. Hait was a tall man, his height matching Creed's six-foot-four. Hait had a wide, barrel-shaped body, and the way

he'd slammed the shotgun to his shoulder indicated quick reflexes.

Hait's voice rang challenging, "You backing the sheriff's play?"

Creed smiled. He knew what these men were thinking as well as if they'd written it down on paper. If he sided against Hait, he backed Lance's position. If he backed Hait, he cut himself off from the town and Lance's Northerners.

"Are you in or out?" Hait insisted.

"I figure you'd better do what the sheriff says."

"You're siding with Lance then," Hait said and, his crew trailing, wheeled from the saloon.

The sheriff stood fast, his bland demeanor showing nothing. He looked at Creed and at the red-cheeked Lance, then with a harried expression shoved outside. Lance edged around so that he faced Creed head on, his face holding a reserved enmity. The other men in the room remained silent. They watched first Lance and then Creed, and he knew they tried to make up their minds about him. He wanted to see what Lance would say and thought he knew. He was surprised when Lance spun around and left the room.

Looking straight ahead, Creed sauntered across the room and out through the swinging doors. Wind from the westward rising ridge poured cool and sweet around him and the smell of strong-scented yarrows freshened the night.

Hearing footsteps in his rear, he turned and spotted two approaching figures. As they neared he saw that the smaller one was a blond-headed woman with a generous, full-lipped mouth. The man was blond also, and something in his features spelled out a brother-sister relationship.

The woman's gaze found the shiny plaque on his shirt and she stopped short. "I'm Kathleen Strong. My father was murdered this afternoon. What do you intend doing about it?"

"That would be a job for your sheriff."

"And what is your job?"

"I'm after the man who killed Billy Riely and Ed Dale."

"I remember Riely. His law was for certain folks. If you were

a Southerner, you didn't happen to be one of them."

"There's no truth in that statement."

"Then why won't you go after the man who killed my father? Is it because you're afraid that one of the wrong folks might be hurt?"

"Let's get one thing straight. I'm here to do a job. I don't care who gets hurt."

"My father was a man of peace, but I'm tired of turning the other cheek. If they want war, I will give it to them."

Her slim-faced brother said softly, "That's poor talk, Kathleen. Dad would be ashamed of you."

Creed put his attention on the boy. He was of average height and weight with inexperience wirtten all over him. Creed put his pipe in his mouth and sucked at the empty stem. Kathleen said, "You are like all the others."

"In that you are wrong but it is unimportant. Listen to your brother. You don't want war."

They swung around Creed and stalked away, Creed's gaze following them. She had spoken from grief and despair but he didn't dismiss her words. There were men here who would back her. Men such as Hait and the others who had swarmed into the Appomattox. This country was spoiling for a fight.

CHAPTER THREE

The lights of the *Jefferson Davis* beckoned and Creed strolled that way. He crossed the courthouse square, and entered the Rebel hangout. The odors of hard liquor, sweat-drenched clothes and musty leather washed around him. At a rear table he spotted Tip Hait, and Hait's face lifted malevolently as Creed neared the bar. The room was filled with men and their harsh tones settled guardedly as he found a place at the mahogany bar.

A chair skidded over the floor; near the doorway a thick-chested man with a heavy black beard stood up. The smile on Creed's lips lengthened. He knew this country and he knew

these men. They'd heard about the hotel clerk but that hadn't been considered much of a test. Blackbeard was different.

The black-whiskered man shoved into an empty slot opposite Creed. "We don't like Yankees drinking in here."

Creed twisted sideways. The shot glass was in his left hand and the smile stayed on his lips. "Why don't you throw me out?"

Blackbeard's gaze widened. He took a half step back and his attention shot to the rear table where Hait and his crew squatted. Something passed between them and the big-chested fellow rammed forward. Creed flung the whiskey square in his face. It burned into Blackbeard's eyes, bringing him to a sudden halt. As his hands scrubbed at his face, Creed aimed a terrific blow at his midsection. It doubled Blackbeard over, sending his breath wrenching outward in a hollow *whoosh.*

Blackbeard was down and he was hurt, but he was far from out of it. The suddenness of Creed's attack had surprised him, but he was a fighter, and the desire to inflict some of the punishment he'd received broadened his face. He pushed up, and as he floundered in that off-balanced position between rising and standing, Creed roared in on him.

Creed jammed a fist into Blackbeard's kidney, drove a thigh into the side of his face. He kept throwing rights and lefts into the black-bearded rebel, forcing him toward the doorway. When Blackbeard reached the threshold, Creed lowered his head and butted his man in the solar plexus. Blackie fell under that onslaught, rolling over the boardwalk and into the street.

Creed swung around and advanced to the room's center. He balanced there and his eyes bracketed Hait's table. Hait's gaze was on him and a sly, feral knowledge lurked there. Then in a matter of seconds, he turned to his companions and dealt out the cards.

Along the bar men were suddenly concerned with their drinks, and men grouped around tables put their attention on poker. Creed moved over to the piano, retrieved his hat and dusted it against his leg. He said, "You people listen and listen

well. I've come for the killer of Billy Riely and Ed Dale. I've got a thousand dollars for the person who brings in the information."

He expected a lull in the conversation but it didn't come. These men continued their individual business and he walked from the saloon. He was here to do a job and he would do it. The law was everything to Creed Weatherall.

CHAPTER FOUR

The nine o'clock sun shone squarely into Creed's window bringing him slowly awake. He stumbled over to the wash basin, then slipped into breeches and a fresh shirt. What he did next was almost ceremonial. Every morning for the past seven years he'd cleaned and polished this badge. To Creed Weatherall it was more than a piece of metal. It was the law.

After breakfast he clipped outside. He crossed an alley, traversed an empty lot and reached the sheriff's office. It was a gloomy room furnished with two desks and four chairs. Behind the front desk the man he'd seen stop Hait at the *Appomattox* stared up at him.

"You didn't waste any time starting it, did you?"

"That's the way it goes."

"I didn't expect to see another one of you fellows."

"Somebody killed Ed Dale and they sent Billy Riely. Somebody killed Riely and I'm here. What about those boys? Who's responsible?"

"I don't know."

"You don't seem to care either."

"Nobody asked you federal men to come in here and stir things up. We were doing all right."

"Deuce Wells bushwacked eight months ago. Henry Strong killed yesterday. What are you going to do about it?"

"Just what I'm paid to do. These folks like to settle their own affairs. They don't want me butting in."

"You're the law."

"I'm an elected official. I give my constituents the kind of

law they want." The sheriff pushed his hat back on his head and threw his feet on the desk. His features were disturbed, defiant.

Creed filled his pipe. "I'll be headquartering here at the jail."

"This is a small office, hardly big enough for one man."

Creed held the pipe in his hand. He considered this man and what he represented. It didn't amount to much, and Creed felt his disdain for Benbow's sheriff intensify. To him there was nothing lower than a man who wore the star and refused to live up to its obligations. "I've got mail coming to this office and I've told a lot of folks this is where I'll be. I'll be using this desk, Larson. I know your kind. You won't be stopping me."

Larson popped out of his chair, lips thinning. "I know your kind, too. Somebody pins a tin star on your shirt and you think you're God-almighty. That badge don't make you nothing special."

As the sheriff wheeled from the office, Creed lighted his pipe. Larson's sentiments were an echo of all he'd seen and heard. These people lived under a sort of truce. But Creed had seen this kind of truce before. Once trouble broke loose it would tear this country apart and there would be no stopping it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Reining well inside a tract of ponderosa pine, Aurora Wells dismounted. Her gaze swept the eastward tilting meadow. In the distance a lone rider angled her way. It would be Tip Hait and she wondered about his message. She swung her riding crop impatiently against her shirt. Her father's murder had poisoned her against the Southerners in this country, and the west fork's refusal to avenge that death had also turned her against them. With Hait's help she intended to make them all pay.

A calico loomed before her and Tip Hait's rugged shape was silhouetted against the horizon. He neared the pines, spotted her and rode up to her mare. She tapped her leg with the crop. "What's wrong?"

Tip stuck a cigar in his mouth, chewed on it. His gaze stayed on her and she knew what he was thinking and she was pleased.

This man was all she had. That he was crafty and secret and thoroughly unscrupulous she well understood, but these things didn't count. What counted was that he would do anything to fulfill her wishes.

He worked the cigar around to the corner of his mouth. "They've sent us a new marshal."

"Is that all?"

"I don't like it."

"The two before him gave us no trouble."

"This one's different. He's big and he's tough and he's all business."

"He's only one man. Get someone after him."

"He beat the hell out of Bull Williams."

"Perhaps I'll have to tame this one."

"That might be harder than you think."

"I could lure him into a trap like I did Billy Riely."

"Killing isn't the answer. They just keep coming."

Aurora braced the crop between both hands and considered Hait thoughtfully. If he was worried about this new marshal, there was reason to worry. "I know one way to solve the problem. Make him fall in love with me."

A frown dug wrinkles deep into Hait's forehead. "I don't like it."

"I could keep him so flustered he wouldn't know what he was doing."

"You know how I feel about you, Aurora. I don't know if I could stand it."

"It won't be for long. We've pushed this country into something it can't back off from."

He took the cigar from his mouth and pulled her roughly to him. She let him have his way. He was a man who would do anything to get what he wanted, and he wanted an empire.

After a moment she drew back. "It will get us what we want."

He shoved the cigar between his teeth and stared at the ground. "All right, but I don't like it."

"I've got a small herd grazing at the knoll. You'd better have

Wade Dodge run off several head tonight."

"What have you got in mind?"

"Tomorrow I'll go into town and report it. Larson won't do anything so I'll talk to the new man. What's his name?"

"Creed Weatherall. Watch yourself, Aurora, this fellow's no fool."

"Leave Weatherall to me. What about your crowd? With Henry Strong dead, will they fight?"

"They hate your guts over here but they don't want to start a fight they might not win."

"You'll have to stir them up."

"I could have Dodge push some Triangle beef over on Yarbough's grass. The sight of Ken Lance's stock on the other side of the river might start some action."

"Then get Dodge on it."

He put a boot in the stirrup, threw a leg over the saddle and spurred off. She swung aboard the mare and trotted eastward. She had no doubts about Weatherall. He was only a man and she could shape men as easily as she could shape a pan of dough.

CHAPTER SIX

At one o'clock Creed smoked a pipe over a second cup of coffee and, dreading the boredom, made his way back to the sheriff's office. When he entered the office, the sheriff's lean countenance greeted him from behind the front desk. Creed nodded and went to the other desk and sat down. Larson had not returned his nod and stared straight ahead toward the open doorway.

Hoofbeats sounded in the street. The rider drew up before the office, dismounted and moved quickly inside. She stopped before the sheriff, long red hair tumbling about her shoulders. "I lost another fifteen head last night. What do you intend doing about it?"

Larson folded his hands over his stomach. "Aurora, I'm doing the best I can."

"Which is exactly nothing."

"It's not as easy as you think. Those cows go up in smoke."

"The only smoke they go up in is the smoke of that bunch across the river. When are you going to stop sitting in the middle and take a hand?"

Larson took out a plug of tobacco and broke off a chew. "Why don't you talk to the new marshal? He's hot for some action."

She seemed to notice Creed for the first time and her green eyes slanted over to him. "I knew Bill Riely. I'm sorry about what happened."

"It's nice to know somebody's sorry."

"My name is Aurora Wells and I need help."

"I didn't come here to hunt rustlers."

"But you could. You're not like Larson. The law means something to you. I can see that."

He examined his pipe. This girl had a directness, a simple way of putting things that got to the heart of the matter. He admired those traits and found himself liking her.

She squared her shoulders and the movement added depth to her body. "I know what you think. To help me is to take sides. But it's either that or sit in the middle and do nothing."

Creed grabbed a chair and pulled it to his desk. As Aurora took a seat, Creed filled his pipe. He brought a light to it and his gaze struck Larson. The sheriff's lean cheeks were ashine with a taciturn wisdom and sly attentiveness flickered in his eyes. Creed turned to the girl. "Tell me about it."

"Someone is stealing me blind . . ."

"You the only person losing beef?"

"Everyone on the west branch is losing cattle."

"Who do you think is behind it?"

"The rebels across the creek."

"You got any proof?"

"They can't forget they lost the war. They hurt us every way they can."

"How about your people? Have they forgot the war?"

"Some of them haven't. If it wasn't for my father, I'd be bitter too. The war cost him a leg as well as a son, but Dad was too big to carry a grudge and now he's dead for it." She leaned forward and lay the riding crop on his desk. The movement stirred her breasts, accentuating the line of her neck and shoulder. "They think because I'm a lone woman they can take advantage of me. They're wrong. I have a gun and I know how to use it."

Her fingers touched the back of his hand. "You've got to help. It's hard being alone."

Creed picked up his pipe, then put it back down. No one had ever affected him so strongly, so quickly.

Aurora stood up. "If you have time, I'll show you my place."

He found Walt Larson's slate-colored gaze full upon him. Larson's lean face reflected a certain imagined knowledge about the girl. As Creed and Aurora walked from the office he knew what this man was thinking.

Afternoon heat packed the square and dust shifted above the yellow-sand street marking a rider's passage. Creed said, "I'll get a horse." Aurora untied her mare and followed him to the livery stable.

She directed him to a grassy cut laying between two timber-studded hillocks. "I have about fifty head beyond that rise. This morning I rode out and found fifteen missing. You can see the tracks. They headed for the river."

Creed had seen them. They led straight east and whoever had pushed this bunch had made no effort to cover the sign.

She had reined so close that when he turned he could smell the fragrance of her breath. Her gaze met his and he was struck anew by her beauty. She smiled and her green eyes sparkled wryly. "Why are you staring at me?"

Trying to keep the warmth from his face, he fumbled for his pipe, thumbed tobacco into it. "Where are these tracks headed?"

"The river."

"Did you follow them?"

"No. As soon as I saw their direction, I rode to town."

He swung his roan around her mare. "Let's see where these go." She kneed her mount and they loped eastward. He was conscious of the ease with which she handled her horse. She was used to the saddle; he was actuely aware of everything she did, every change of her expressive face.

At the spot where they halted, the river spanned roughly ten yards. Creed dismounted and examined the tracks. "It happened early this morning."

She was at his shoulder. "I don't see any sign on the other side."

"They could have pushed them down river before bringing them out."

The sun stood at a hundred degree angle and shadows veiled the lower reaches of the distance hills. Creed said, "How well did you know Billy Riely?"

"Well enough to like him."

"How was he killed?"

"Shot in the back of the head. Able Crown found his body about six miles upriver."

"On the Southerner side?"

"On this side."

"Where does this Crown live?"

"Straight down river. You can't miss his place."

The pipe made a squeaking sound and he thrust it in his belt. When he looked up, he saw something in her gaze that brought a jerk to his breathing.

Her shoulders were square, and a thoughtfulness flattened her mouth. "It's a long trip to Benbow. Ride out to the ranch and I'll fix some supper."

"You're a single woman. Are you sure it wouldn't cause talk?"

"I don't know, but they may as well get used to seeing us together."

He stared at her, but she swung her horse north and he fell in beside her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

On his second morning in Benbow, Creed stood before the hotel window and let his gaze sweep the town. Supper at Aurora's had been a leisurely affair with much inconsequential talk. She'd wanted to know about him and he'd told her all. He was a man who talked little about himself and he was surprised remembering how he'd opened up to her. He had his breakfast and, afterwards, read the week-old Denver paper. Finally he tossed the paper aside, strolled out to the street and turned toward the livery stable. The odor of feed and manure reached out to him and a hammer's beat rasped the air. The thin-featured stable owner lounged just inside the double doors and, as Creed entered, his face lifted expectantly.

"Need the roan again, Marshal?"

Creed nodded. "What road do I take to Henry Strong's place?"

The stableman's eyelids shuttled forward. "Follow Main over the creek. The road will take you there."

The road curved over the creek, marched eastward, and Creed found himself in a valley bordered by low pine-sloped hills. Roughly fifteen miles in the distance was a line of buttes and above their jagged thrust the sun shone fitfully. This valley was a stretch of green locked away from the rest of the country. It was probably used for grazing, but timber grew thick upon the hillsides and the soil was rich and deep.

He went on a mile and found a spot where aspens came down from the foothills to form a narrow bottleneck. He rode through the aspens and came out in a land of broken draws. A trail lifted into the woods to his left and he followed it.

His pipe was out and he pulled the roan in and knocked the ashes out against his boot heel. As he straightened, something jerked the hat from his head and a rifle shot echoed over the trees. The shot had come from his right and he lunged sideways from the saddle, putting the roan between himself and the danger. Two horsemen broke from the brush and he saw Kathleen Strong's yellow hair flash brilliantly. The second rider was her brother.

As they came up the hill, Creed reached down and retrieved his Stetson. He pushed a finger through the punctured crown. "This hat cost me fifteen dollars."

Kathleen positioned her mount so that the rifle she balanced pointed dead at him. "You're lucky it was only your hat. This is my land. You're trespassing."

"Just trying to learn the country."

"Why this part of the country?"

"I was on the other side of the river yesterday."

"That I don't doubt. You're like the two who came before you. You represent Yankee law."

"You're wrong in that. Miss Wells has been missing some cattle."

"I thought your job was to get the men who killed your friends. Our troubles will be tended by the sheriff."

"Maybe I changed my mind."

"It's my thought that someone changed it for you."

"You wanted me to look into your father's death. That's why I'm here."

"We don't need your help."

Young Strong's mouth pulled flat at the corners and he put a hand on his sister's arm. "You're going about this wrong. If he's come as a friend, don't let your stubbornness make an enemy."

Creed stuck his empty pipe between his teeth. This boy was confident and showed more awareness than his sister.

Kathleen rammed the carbine into its boot. "Jim's right. There's no sense in making trouble."

"So you've changed your mind about a range war," Creed said.

Jim Strong wrapped his hands around the saddle horn, locked his elbows. "Two wrongs don't make a right. Kathleen knows that."

Creed nodded. His teeth were firm on the pipe stem and he observed Kathleen closely. She wore denims, a red flannel shirt, and a blue bandanna knotted around her neck. "I'd like to see

the spot where your father was murdered," he said.

The boy glanced at his sister and his jaw dipped forward. "I'll be heading into town." As he galloped off Kathleen said, "It's a couple of miles east," and reining around, held the mare in until Creed came up to her. They made the ride in silence, pulling up at a deep cut between two rises.

"This is where Jim found him."

Creed stepped from the mare. The cut was carpeted with grass and he found no sign. Not that he'd expected to find any. His gaze went up the south ridge and he hiked to the top. He found nothing and retracing his steps, climbed the north slope. He located the metal casing he looked for and after a cursory glance dropped it in his pocket. When he reached level ground, she still sat the mare, her gaze holding a prejudgement.

"Did you find anything?"

"More than I expected. Our man's careless. Of course, with the law in this country, he can afford to be."

"What do you know?"

"He uses a Winchester seventy-three, which is no help because everybody uses one. He's tall, he's heavy, and he's a good shot."

"In other words you found nothing."

"That's what you expected me to find, wasn't it?"

"More or less, but I think I'm beginning to understand something about you. You're as smart as you're tough. That may get you through but I doubt it. To have any effect you must stay in the middle. You'll find that impossible."

"You're right about one thing. I'm the fellow on the fence. That's where I'll stay until I get what I came for."

"And you came to get your friends' murderers."

He looked up at her and sunlight put a sheen in her hair. She was a stiff-backed one. She didn't trust him and she didn't like him and she held a reserved buffer between them. "I'm here to enforce the law."

"If you're telling the truth, you'll find it takes some doing. There are men here who can't, or won't, forget the past."

"I came to do a job. If I have to step on a few toes, it won't bother me."

"You like to step on toes, don't you?"

"When they interfere with the law."

She put her hands on her thighs and her mouth pursed heavily. She still mistrusted him, but she was considering what he'd said and all it implied. She had a boyish shape and there was a pensiveness about her that communicated itself vaguely. "This country is ready to fall apart. For years my father and Deuce Wells were the stabilizing forces. Now, both of them are dead. We need a strong man to keep things from blowing sky high. If you're not that man, these hills will change color."

"What about you?" he said. "Where do you stand in this?"

"More killing won't solve anything."

He boarded the roan. This was a different woman than the one he'd met in Benbow. Besides Aurora, she and her brother were the only ones in this situation who seemed to have any sense. "Guess I'll drop by Tip Hait's. Thanks for your trouble."

"What do you want with Tip?"

"A few questions. He's a man I feel could answer some."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The roan carried him through timber-locked hills into a broad expanse of grass that funneled toward the distant mountains. He remembered the look on Kathleen's face when he'd mentioned Tip Hait and it encouraged him. She would let the others know that he had talked to Hait and that might undermine Hait's position. He was the rebel's leader and if they lost faith in him, it would go a long way in forestalling trouble.

A deer walked out of the brush to Creed's right, reared to a startled halt and charged back into the timber. This was pretty country and it deserved a better break than it was getting. When Creed reported to Denver, he hadn't expected this assignment. He and his chief, Tim Brown, were on the outs. "You about ready for a little action?" Brown asked.

He'd answered, "You mean you'd trust me with some?"

Tim's gaze had gone over him. "I'm putting aside my reservations about the way you enforce the law."

"Who am I after?"

"I don't know. In the last year I've lost Ed Dale and Billy Riely. They were good men. I know how you work and I won't ask any questions. Just clean that place up."

"You and I never did see eye to eye on things, so why are you sending me?"

"I've told you before, Creed, you're not the law. You're too high-handed. That's why I'm sending you. I need somebody who'll throw the book away and go the limit."

The ranch nestled beneath some aspens. A porch traversed the front of the building and Tip Hait sprawled loosely in one of its three rocking chairs. Hait threw his feet up on the railing and crossed his legs. He held a wad of tobacco in his mouth and shifted it around to his left cheek.

Creed reined up in front of the porch. "About the other night? Why did you throw those men at me?"

"I didn't throw anybody at you. You're making a mistake."

"No mistake. You run things over here and we both know it."

"The boys don't like Yankees. It's as simple as that. My advice is to stay on the other side of the river."

"I was checking Henry Strong's murder. The fellow who killed him chewed tobacco." It was a shot in the dark and it produced no change in Hait. He scrubbed his shoulders against the chair's back and sucked at the wad of twist. Creed took out his pipe, tamped tobacco in the bowl. He knew men and the fellow on the porch was a tough one. He figured Hait outstripped his own two hundred and twenty-five pounds by a good thirty; yet there was no fat on the man. If he meant to keep peace in this country, he'd have to lean on Hait. This fellow understood trouble.

Creed dropped his match. "I figure Strong's killer was just about your size."

Hait laughed. He spat out a wad of tobacco juice and ran a hand through his hair. "The man you want is on the other side of the river. I'll tell you something else. If you don't get him, we will."

Creed let smoke curl from his lips. Hait was shrewd. He pushed deliberately, hoping for a reaction that would tell him something about a man he might have to face. Creed shook his head. "As regards to Strong's murderer, I'll find him. But while I'm at it, you'll stay on your side of the river. Remember that. You start anything and I'll finish it."

Hait rose from the rocker. Creed's tone had stung him, roused his pride. It showed in the freshness of his coloring, the curl of his lips. He stalked to the edge of the porch and his shoulders lifted threateningly. "Mister, you push yourself into my business and you ask for trouble."

Creed looked at the ground. "There's something odd going on in this country. People don't want a fight unless they figure they can win. Yet everybody is spoiling for war. Somebody's pushing, and whoever that somebody is figures to get something out of it. What do you figure to get, Hait?"

Hait switched the tobacco from one side of his mouth to the other. "It's the fellows on the other side of the river doing the pushing. Henry Strong dead, our cattle being run off. Hell, we got to protect ourselves."

"Remember what I said and stay over here where you belong."

"What about Lance and his outfit? What's stopping them from crossing the river?"

"I'll give Lance the same message you got."

Hait spit directly forward. The tobacco juice hit the hitching rail, splattered over the roan's nose. "I got my own wants to worry about, Marshal."

Wheeling the roan, Creed kneed him into a trot. He wanted to get down and bust Hait square in his tobacco-stained mouth. Hait was trying him, seeing if Creed could be pushed into a fight. A man who could be provoked was an easier man to con-

trol than the one who made a stand on his own ground. Creed knew it, and rode off.

CHAPTER NINE

As Tip Hait topped the hill the sun was strong on his shoulders. By now Muley Owens would have delivered his message and Weatherall would be stewing. The big lawman was no fool and would see through the trap. Weatherall's foreknowledge appealed to Hait. How a man applied pressure was one thing, how he reacted to it was something else.

To pull off this deal wouldn't be easy. Weatherall was tough and he was smart, but he had his weakness and Hait had spotted it. Weatherall put the law above everything and his vulnerability lay in his determination to enforce it. He would go after his man regardless of odds.

Hait entered a run of spruce growing beside a seven foot wide stream that chiseled its way through the rugged country. Under the trees was a one room shack and before it three horses were tendered. As he rode in a slump-shouldered fellow appeared in the doorway. As Hait dropped from his calico, two other men strolled from the hut. One of these, a plank-thin individual, waited by the window. The second, a bald-headed puncher in his mid-forties, rolled over the yard to where Hait waited.

"What brings you down here?"

"Jim and Kathleen Strong have a herd over in their west pasture. I want them run off tonight."

"How many head?"

"Seventy-five, a hundred."

Wade Dodge ran a handkerchief over his shiny dome. He was roly-poly with a bright red mouth, and eyes that wouldn't stop twinkling. "You aiming to put an end to this setup?"

Hait stuck a cigar in his teeth, chewing on the end of it. "There's a new marshal in Benbow."

"We heard. Maybe we ought to lay low, give him time to get his fill of this country."

"You're going to see that he gets his fill of it."

"Meaning?"

"He figures you killed Billy Riely."

The twinkle went out of Wade's eye and his mouth lost some of its fullness. "You got the wrong possum for this chore. I ain't fighting that hombre."

"I don't mean for Weatherall to take you. Just have your bunch in town Wednesday night and don't wear a gun." Hait spat out tobacco juice, glancing at the slender puncher near the cabin. "Moody, I'll have some people in town to help out. See that Weatherall doesn't pick up Wade and it's five hundred dollars in your pocket."

Wade ran the handkerchief over his head again. "Figure some other way. I don't aim to tangle with that hombre."

Hait took a step forward. He removed the cigar from his teeth, spat near Wade's boot. "Wednesday night, early. You get that?"

Wade stared off at a spot near Hait's right shoulder. "All right, Tip."

Saddle leather creaked under Hait's rising weight. He put his attention on Moody, on the third man so stiff and silent in the yard. Creatures like these were dogs. They understood two things—punishment and reward. As he kicked the calico out of the clearing, Hait knew a quick contempt for all of them.

Sunlight bounced off the boardwalk's silvered planking and reflected into the sheriff's office. That reflection was abruptly shut off as a man filled the doorway.

The man shuffled up to where Creed sat. Hooking his thumbs in his gunbelt he said, "I come about the reward money."

"What about it?"

"The fellow you want is Wade Dodge. He shot Dale and Riely."

"Tell me some more."

"How much you want for that thousand dollars? I told you your man. Ain't that enough?"

"Anybody can walk in here and give me a name. It takes more than that."

"I guess I had you figured wrong. Maybe we'd just better forget it."

Footsteps scraped over the door sill, and Larson's pot-bellied figure paused behind Creed's informant. "Better forget what, Muley?"

Muley turned so that he could see both Creed and Larson. "I just gave the marshal some information. 'Pears he don't want those killers so bad after all." He hitched his belt up, swung away from the desk and moved outside.

Larson rested his haunches on the edge of the desk. "What name did Muley give you?"

"Wade Dodge. Know him?"

"He's got a place the other side of the foothills. Close-mouthed cuss. I figure he's stocking his larder with somebody else's beef. You going after him?"

"By the time Muley gets through spreading our talk all over town I won't have much choice, but I guess the two of us can handle it."

Larson's head jerked up like a calf at the end of a rope. "This is your piece of pie. You've been pushing ever since you got out of that stagecoach. I told you what was coming."

Creed's lips ran a half-smile across his cheeks. He dropped his feet from the desk and shoved his hard-muscled bulk upright. "You're a poor man to wear the star."

"I didn't ask you to come here and butt into my business. Why should I feel responsible for you?"

"Your loyalty is to the law. I repeat, you're a poor man to wear the star."

Larson's jaws trembled; he placed his palms flat against the desktop. "You damn fool. If you want to get your head blowed off that's your affair. Why try to throw it off on me."

Creed heaved past Larson. His boots struck the front walk and as he rounded the corner he saw Muley talking to a group in front of Dan's Cafe. Even though the trap was obvious, he knew he would have to go after Wade Dodge. If he backed down the town would know and what little respect he'd pounded into

these people would be lost forever.

CHAPTER TEN

Wednesday morning's ten o'clock warmth found Creed struggling out of bed. He put his feet on the floor, sleepwalked over to the wash basin and dashed water into his face. Afterwards he drew on his trousers and shaved. Pulling on his boots and a fresh shirt, he picked up the star. It was brassy bright with no trace of tarnish; still he went through his daily polishing routine.

Footsteps treaded up the hall. They paused at Creed's doorway and someone rapped twice. He said, "Come in," and the door opened before Aurora Wells. She wore a green outfit that matched her eyes and her red hair fell bright around her neckline. "Wade Dodge will be in Benbow tonight. He won't come alone."

"Where did you hear this?"

"It's all over town."

"If he comes to Benbow, I'll have to go after him."

"If you do, they'll kill you, Creed . . . I'm a lone woman and I'm afraid. My father told me that when I met the right man I should let him know it. I don't want to lose you."

Carefully he lay the star on the dresser. Then his arms were around her. He forgot the town, the people, the job he had to do.

She stepped back and her mouth was smiling. "I knew I wasn't wrong in what I felt."

He picked up his pipe and, without realizing it, packed tobacco into the bowl. He thought of what she had said, and realized what it meant to him, to his job, to his reason for coming to this town in the first place.

The unlighted pipe was in his hand and he put a match to it. "You're right about Dodge. He won't be alone."

She swung away from him. Her attention fell on the dresser and she walked over and cupped the star in her hand. He was

beginning to annoy her and she was at a loss for what to say.

The star's balled tips gouged her hand and her grip slackened. She had to talk him into leaving town before Dodge arrived. Tip Hait had his own ideas; otherwise he would not have arranged this. Yet, her way was best. Creed Weatherall was big and he was tough. It was too big a chance Dodge might talk.

She wasn't quite certain of what she should do so she decided on the one procedure that always worked with a man. She pulled her shoulders back, stepped to him and her arms slid around his neck. His response was exactly as she'd expected, and when she broke the embrace, she'd regained control of the situation.

"I've lost more cattle, Creed. It's all the excuse you need to leave town."

"That's the trouble. It's an excuse. If I run from Dodge, I'll have to fight every man, woman and child in this country."

"Creed, you're making too much of this. You came here to get Dale and Riely's killers. Now that you know who you're after, why not take him at your own advantage?"

"There's more to my being here than Wade Dodge. I'm supposed to clean up the country. I can't do that without taking a risk. If you want me to, I'll turn in my badge. Being a lawman is no profession for a man with a woman like you, Aurora."

The star lay in her hand and she considered it. Then she reached out and pinned it to his shirt, forcing herself to speak humbly. "That's where it belongs, Creed. If you turn away from this it will always lay between us. I won't have a man who's lost his pride. You're coming with me and you're going to work this out in a way that won't get you killed."

She had to bite her lip at the look on his face. She kept biting until she thought the blood would come, but it was the only way she could keep from laughing. Tacking that stupid hunk of metal on his shirt had turned the trick.

"I guess you're right, Aurora."

Her hand was on his arm and she drew him toward the door-

way. As he buckled on his gunbelt, she pressed her palms together. The moment he climbed on a horse and followed her west, his influence was as dead as the tobacco in the bowl of his pipe. He was only a man and men were easy to manage.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

From his seat on the roan, Creed Weatherall could see along the two hundred foot aspen-arched trail to the wheat-hued ground beyond. Aurora held a steady pace at the roan's side and her wavy hair fell moistly-red over her shoulders. Creed was full of misapprehension. He was running from Wade Dodge and the knowledge oppressed him. Running was something he'd never done. He wondered how he was going to adjust to it. It was hard to keep riding feeling the way he did about it.

When they reached the spot where the aspens met the meadow, Creed drew up. The roan stood in half sun, half shade, with the odors of pollen and resin perfuming the air. He felt Aurora's attention and looked down at her. "I'm going back."

"I thought we'd decided this?"

"It was the wrong decision."

"I don't understand."

"Back at the hotel you said if I backed off it would stay between us. You were right. I can't quit. Not and live with myself."

"Creed, those were words. Words used by a woman in love. All I care about is your safety."

"Man's a funny creature. There's something in him that rebels against running. I don't say there's any sense to it but that's the way it is."

"Creed . . . ."

"Don't come into town. I'll have enough to worry about without you there." He dug in his spurs and the roan bolted forward. The landscape wheeled before him and he didn't look back. Seeing her again might turn him from what he had to do. Still, it was as though half of him was still there in the middle

of the road with her.

It was hard to believe she loved him; he had nothing to offer and with her beauty she could have any man she wanted. The law didn't mean anything now. He was doing this for her; for the both of them. Once this job was finished, he would turn in the star.

The sound of a fast-moving horse jarred Creed's thoughts. The animal was heading west, away from town, and Creed pulled off the trail into a thicket. Moments later a rider pounded by and Creed edged the roan back onto the trail. Word was going out that he'd left Benbow. It would stir up the countryside, make these folks wonder if he was more bluff than nerve.

The trail reached a peak that rolled down into the shallow breach occupied by Benbow. He reached this peak, steered in behind some brush and looked down on the rooftops below. The trees hid him from the trail and from the town, yet he could clearly see the four corners of the compass driving into Benbow's square. There was not much going on, and for a while it would remain that way.

Near four o'clock Creed heard the sound of hooves breaking through the wooded area to his right. He kept his attention that way; ten minutes later Kathleen Strong's robust figure pushed into view. She drew rein near him and dropped to the ground. "When they said you'd run, I didn't believe it."

"But you came to see."

"I keep remembering you said something about cleaning up this country. If you meant it what happens tonight will go a long way in deciding what happens."

Creed sucked at the pipe. A couple of riders cantered off of the hill directly west and headed toward Benbow. It was late afternoon with the sun poised on the horizon like a red dish. The town would start filling soon and that would complicate matters. There would be forty or fifty hostile men crammed into the town below and anything that brought these people face to face begged trouble.

"Where's your brother?"

"He didn't want any part of this."

"But you did."

"It's important to me. As I told you, we need a strong man here. Tonight will prove whether or not you're that man. It will decide whether we have peace or war. Tip Hait has been talking. He means to take matters into his own hands."

"Why tell me Hait's plans?"

"Because you're the only one who can do anything about them."

"I told Hait if he crossed the river, I'd come after him."

"How did you find out about Dodge?"

"Muley Owens."

"Muley does nothing that Tip doesn't tell him. It means Tip intends to kill you."

The shadows lengthened and he put his back against one of the spruce trees. "Tell me about yourself, Kathleen. Why did you come here?"

"There was nothing left for us in Alabama. Our farm was ruined, my mother was dead. There was nothing but hatred and regret. My father didn't believe in either, so we came West."

"But the hatred followed you."

"That's the sad part. People won't admit the war is over."

"Why didn't you move on?"

"My father was an idealist. He thought he could make these men see that killing wasn't the answer."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't want pity. I want my father's death to stand for something."

He lay his pipe on the ground. The war had cost her much; still, she showed no rancor. His head dipped toward the town. "More riders coming in."

Her gaze swept the clearing, centering on him. "It is a lonely life you lead."

The statement surprised him, brought his gaze to her. "I have had the law."

She looked off in the distance and her lower lip folded over her upper. "I heard that you left Benbow with Aurora Wells."

He retrieved his pipe and tapped the bowl against his boot. Kathleen still stared east, the corner of her mouth setting in a strict line. Creed sensed her dislike for Aurora. It made him cautious. "Aurora is losing a lot of beef."

"I told you before, she's not the only one losing cattle. The east fork is being rustled blind."

"Any idea where they're going?"

"They just disappear. You follow them to the river and that's the end of them. But they get to the river, that's enough for Tip Hait and the others."

Twilight gathered over the clearing. Below a few lights beamed out in yellow streaks and Benbow was a hazy outline. The sound of eastward-drifting horsemen rose dully and the odors of spruce-gum and yarrows flavored the air. Creed came to his feet. He stuck out his hand; Kathleen took it and he pulled her to an upright position.

"Benbow is no place for you tonight. Go home and forget this."

"What about you? What do you plan to do?"

"It will depend on the choices Hait and Dodge give me."

She waited for a moment, her hand encased in his. He had the feeling she wanted to say more and couldn't find the words.

Then she withdrew her fingers and mounted the mare. As she trotted off, night shapes closed around her, and he turned and considered the town below.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ken Lance and two other riders boiled into Benbow just as Creed reached the stables. Muley Owens stood in the dust fronting the livery, his sharp face looking up at Creed in swift anticipation. Glancing down South Street, Creed saw several men grouping in the courthouse square. Sheriff Walt Larson occupied the jail's doorway and his taciturn expression couldn't

hide the interest holding him there.

Larson crossed the street and planted his pot-bellied form before Creed. "Dodge is in the hotel dining room. They're waiting for you."

Creed nodded and swung up the street. At the intersection, lamplight from Knight's Dry Goods etched silver lattices on the boardwalk. Kathleen Strong waited on Main's southwest corner, her face pale and uncertain. Creed tipped his hat and saw Knight step out on the walk three feet to Kathleen's rear. A knot of men whispering by the courthouse steps watched him furtively, and as he passed the Wells Fargo office the stage driver gave him an open stare.

Creed pulled in at the cafe. Except for an aged waitress who took his order, the cafe was empty. When she brought the meal, he made himself eat leisurely and afterwards lighted a pipe. This affair was in his hands now. He'd let Hait wait and wonder.

The cafe door opened. Kathleen entered, walked to his table and took a chair. "At a time like this, you need at least one friend."

"You know what this town will think."

"I'm beginning to disregard what this town thinks. These people are fools. They deserve what they are getting."

"It may end better than you think. If I get Dodge, Hait is through. That crowd wouldn't follow him to a brush fire."

"There's still Ken Lance."

"Lance is a blusterer. He'll never bring his gang across the river."

"So if you stop Hait, everything will be perfect."

"No, Kathleen, it won't be perfect. Feelings generated by four years of war and ten years of feuding don't change over night." He stood up, pushed the pipe in his belt and clapped on his hat. "Thanks for coming. It has helped me at a bad time."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Creed ankled over the thoroughfare, acutely aware of things

happening around him. The slam of a door, the yell of the driver as the stage finally lurched into motion, a shadow ducking around the side of the Appomattox. Fifty yards away the hotel lights gleamed frostily and he counted ten figures around the hotel doorway.

Men gathered in the hotel lobby, but this crowd consisted of both townsmen and ranchers. The danger wasn't here. Just inside the dining room, he paused. At the room's midpoint, Tip Hait's two hundred and fifty pounds stood balanced and ready. Beyond Hait was at a table rammed as close to the corner as it would go; pinned between the wall and the table was a bald-headed man in a gray shirt. The man's skull was sweat-shiny and a cup of coffee sat on the table before him. He kept his gaze on the cup, and although Creed had never seen Wade Dodge, he knew this was his man.

Creed's gaze shifted and he saw Ken Lance's tight drawn figure in the center of several Northerners. More cattlemen were scattered along the wall blocking the door that led to the kitchen. All these men were silent but it didn't take words to explain the drawn shoulders, the whitened knuckles, the sudden gust of a withheld breath breaking over the smoke-filled space.

Hait stuck a cigar in his mouth and chewed on it. He stood straddle-legged in the room's middle and all the attention trickled up to him, eddied there and flowed back to Weatherall. To Creed's right someone coughed and Ken Lance scrubbed a hand over his mouth. Dodge still retained his spot at the table, his eyes still studying his cup of coffee. Creed said, "Dodge, come here," and the bald man's head snapped upright.

Hait laughed: "If you want him, take him."

At these words the men along the east wall shuffled toward Dodge's corner while Lance's crowd froze in their tracks. Creed said, "Dodge, get up here. I won't tell you again."

Hait thrust his thumbs in his belt. "He's got no gun. You can't shoot an unarmed man."

Shuffling figures closed in front of Dodge, partially shielding

him from Creed's view. Hait's powerful shape filled the aisle between the two rows of tables and the west fork crew watched with growing concern. Creed felt his temper rise. The law was everything; yet not one of the thirty-five or forty men ranged here had any respect for it.

Creed stepped forward. He saw Hait's elbow lift, and at that moment, he slammed his weight forward. His head caught Hait in the chest, throwing the big rancher off balance. As Hait fought to keep his feet, Creed's hand dropped, rose, dropped again, the barrel of his revolver laying the flesh open along Hait's temple. Hait hit the floor so hard he bounced, his gun rattling across the room.

The men grouped around Dodge held their places but an uncertainty pitted their countenances. Hait had been the leader and his defeat unsettled them. Yarbough's face was strangely sullen. Brooks Reams gnawed at his upper lip. Bull Williams pushed out for the rear, taking his place beside Yarbough, as Muley's rangy shape shoved into view. Creed paced straight for Bull Williams. As Creed approached, Bull pulled around so that Creed could pass into the body of men blocking his passage. Then he was at the rear table and Dodge stared up at him. He motioned with the revolver and Dodge sagged to his feet and Creed turned to make his way back through the mass of humanity.

But the alleyway had closed. The pack now stood shoulder to shoulder and there was no give in their faces. Creed grabbed Dodge's sweat-soaked collar and using him as a battering ram drove forward. Dodge collided with the first row of men. As Dodge stumbled, Creed turned sideways and shoved him on. A man shouted. Someone grabbed Creed's shirt and Creed slapped his gun barrel hard against the grasping fingers. Another hand closed over his shoulder and he felt his shirt rip as he hustled Dodge along. A red-haired puncher swung, hitting him a glancing blow and Creed drew blood from this fellow's forehead with a slashing gunsight.

Creed was at the mob's outer edge and Dodge fell into the clear dragging him forward. Bull Williams swore and charged in from the right. His heavy fist caught Creed between the eyes with a force that broke his hold on Dodge's collar. Creed hit the floor on his left hip. He saw Dodge squirm back inside this charging rabble as a slender cowboy with a raised hand gun stepped forward.

Creed threw himself sideways. Splinters flew into his neck and a gunshot almost split his eardrums. His sights came up, were bracketed by the cowboy's almond-shaped eyes. The gun kicked against his palm as the man he shot flew backwards.

Another gun roared off to Creed's right and the crowd broke for a moment. The overhead light caught his attention and he fired a round that splattered the glove and sent glass and oil spewing down over the corner. Amidst the shouting and cursing, men clawed for their guns, while others ducked behind tables. Creed twisted and threw another round into the other lamp. It shattered and under the cover of darkness he reached his feet. To his right a window's pale outline beckoned. He bolted that way and hurtled headlong into the alley.

Shouts and curses rose from the room and boots scrapped over flooring. A head and shoulders silhouetted in the window. Creed threw a shot at that outline, then wheeled and scampered up the alley. The lights of the jail gleamed twenty yards away and he lined in that direction. Behind him men yelled and someone fired a shot in the night. The jail was at hand and he rounded the corner and swept inside.

The office was empty. He darted past Larson's desk, paused before the rifle rack. The rack was locked and he cursed as he searched Larson's desk for the key. They would be coming for him and he had run as far as he intended to run. The key was missing and he turned and blew the lock off the rack. That gunshot swelled the tiny office. It was a sound that could be heard all over town. A shotgun's familiar weight heavied his hands. He opened the breech and reached for a box of shells.

"Put the gun up. You've had your fun for tonight."

Larson stood in the doorway and Creed gave him a flat look.

His hat had been lost in the fight and hair fell wildly across his forehead. "Don't get in my way, Larson."

"Put the gun up. They're not coming after you."

Slowly Creed replaced the shotgun. Larson was right. There was no need for them to come after him. He'd failed. Hait had beaten him.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After breakfast the next morning, Creed found a seat in the lobby. He picked up the Denver paper and glanced at it, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Failure was hard. It made him restless and uncertain.

For a dreary interval he forced himself to concentrate on the paper. Later someone halted before him and he glared up in blunt antagonism. He awkwardly reached his feet. He felt a flush of embarrassment sweep over him. Aurora said, "I waited all night."

"I couldn't face you."

"You know how I feel. When you're hurt, I'm hurt."

She'd come because of him and the realization made him heady. Because of the Dodge episode every hand in this country would be against him, but that didn't stop Aurora. She didn't care what this town thought.

"What do you intend doing?"

"I'm going after Tip Hait."

"What can you charge him with?"

"I'm the law. If I get him, that's all that matters."

"From what I hear half the men in fifty miles interfered. If you arrest Hait, you'll have to arrest all of them. That wouldn't be practical."

"Maybe not, but I've got to do something and fast."

"Arresting Tip Hait will anger the others. They'll say you picked him because he was a southerner."

Her fingers were on his arm and he closed his hand over them. She trusted him; she had confidence in his ability. This

country's contempt couldn't touch him now.

"Creed, there's a dance Saturday night. Go with me."

"I can't do that. It'll look like I'm taking sides."

"This is a social affair. There are no sides."

He looked at the floor. It would be hard. He didn't know if he could do it. She said, "I'll be with you," and he was ashamed. She understood how tough it was; she was willing to meet it with him.

"We'll go to the dance, Aurora."

Her shoulders squared; her hands came together. "I've got to run. Business. Come to the ranch when you can."

He followed her to the walk and watched her stride toward the bank. She had a strong, womanly figure and he saw other gazes swing admiringly after her. It made him proud, happy.

As Aurora Wells pulled up at Wade Dodge's shack, a chunky fellow appeared in the doorway. This one glanced back, said something, and Wade Dodge rolled outside. Dodge removed his hat and his bald head glittered sweatily. "You're on the wrong side of the river, ain't you?"

She stepped to the ground and ran her gaze around the clearing. The riding crop was in her hand and she tapped it against her thigh in slow rhythm.

"I've got a job for you."

"Job? You're a Yankee."

"Saturday night I want you to cut two or three head from my herd. Drive them to Whit Sparks', buther them and leave the hides in Whit's barn."

"You're talking to the wrong man. I just . . . ."

"You do what Tip Hait tells you and we're in this together."

Dodge clapped his hat on his head, pinched his upper lip. "I don't know whether you're lying or not but it don't matter. I'm pulling out. I won't be here Saturday night."

"Tip and I have put a gold mine in your pocket. You can't run now."

"I been thinking. Everybody says that the marshal is finished because of the other night, but all he's got to do is nail my hide

to the wall. He's smart enough to know that and he'll be coming. I didn't kill Riely and I ain't facing Weatherall."

"You don't have to worry about Weatherall. He'll do what I want him to do. Push those cows over to Sparks and inside a week Weatherall's a dead man."

"I don't want any part of it."

She glanced at the chunky fellow who didn't move. Then she walked over to him, pressed the end of the quirt against his chest. "Tell Tip exactly what I said. Tell him it will solve our problems."

When his head tipped in acquiescence, she turned to the mare.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It had been a day and a night since Creed had seen Aurora, and he entered the Circle R Ranch with a school boy's impatience. As he bounded up the steps the door opened and she stood there with one hand on the door jam, the other on her hip. He towered above her. The perfumed warmth of her body swept over him, and he had a desire to pick her up and whirl her around the porch. They'd had fun at the dance, but everything with Aurora was fun.

"You look wonderful," he said.

"I just got out of bed," she laughed.

"I haven't been up this early in years, but I had to see you. Is it all right?"

"You know how I feel. I haven't tried to hide it."

He nodded. This was another thing he loved about her. She didn't seem to understand subterfuge. She apparently wanted him and it was as simple as that.

"Come in, Creed. We'll have some coffee." Across the table her gaze was serious. "I lost a few more head over the weekend. The tracks cross the river and the sign is clear."

"That's unusual."

"It's what we've been hoping for. Creed, this is our chance."

"But why would anyone suddenly be so careless?"

"I don't know, but if you find those cattle you'll show the cattlemen on the other side of the river that Tip Hait hasn't scared you."

He shook his head, pleased with her enthusiasm. Then he stood up. "I'd better get on those tracks."

Her arms were strong, her kiss hard. "Creed, don't let anything go wrong. So much depends on this."

"I'll bring him in. Don't fret about it."

An hour's journey brought him to the river and he followed its watery course until he cut the sign she'd mentioned. It was about a day old and slanted due east. The tracks were so prominent that it appeared as though they'd been left here for him to find and he assumed this was another of Tip Hait's tricks. He kicked the roan across the river. The trail paralleled the bank and he followed it at a walk. In the distance he saw smoke and the land before him rose and fell in shallow undulations.

Creed topped several hills and in a half hour was poised at the apex of a high ridge. A sod shack sat directly below him. By the shack he saw a stake-bodied wagon, and off to the left was a smaller hut. A woman stepped from the larger shanty. She shuffled to a wash pot situated over a bed of coals and poked at its contents with a long stick. Smoke puffed up in widening spirals and the woman threw another piece of wood on the fire. A boy and a girl ran from the cabin, and an old greyhound dashed from the shade of an aspen to join them.

The woman looked up from her washing as he entered the yard. The children paused at their play and the hound let out a howl and bared his teeth. The woman said, "Quiet, Mitz" and, teeth still showing, the dog sank at her heels. Creed pulled up by the wash pot. He watched the woman's gaze focus on his star, seeing a veiled apprehension skim momentarily over her face.

"Whose place is this?"

"Whit Sparks."

"Where's your man?"

"Over to Ace Yarbough's. Missus Yarbough is sick. I sent some vittles."

"When's he due back?"

"Around dinner time."

"I'll wait."

As Creed dropped from the roan, the dog growled. Creed snapped his fingers and the animal quit growling, and when Creed whistled the mongrel's tail wagged tentatively. A sod barn reared off to his left and he hiked over. He didn't look around but he knew the woman watched him, and he sensed the children puttering around at his rear. He entered the hut and the steamy odor of drying sod enveloped him. Old pieces of harness littered the floor. He saw a wooden bucket with a hole in the bottom and a splintered wagon tongue occupied one corner.

A rolled up object lay next to the wall. He walked over, kicked the object into better light and a length of cowhide unfolded itself before him. A Circle brand imprinted its center. He glanced through the doorway. The woman pinned up the last of her wash and the children played a game of catch. None of them seemed to have noticed the hide in his hand; if they did notice, it didn't bother them.

Creed hoofed over to the aspen and hunkered down in the shade. He hoped Sparks would arrive soon. He didn't like this waiting. The girl squealed and Creed saw the ball sail over her head and land at his feet. He picked it up and held it out to her. "How old are you?"

"Seven. Earl's nine."

The boy edged over. He wore patched overalls and a shirt a size too large for him. "Are you going to arrest my pa?"

"I just want to talk to him."

"You won't take him away?"

"Nothing like that, son."

"I heard you kicked hell out of Bull Williams. Weren't you scared?"

Before Creed could answer, the woman appeared in the door-

way. "Earl, leave the man alone. Come to dinner. What about you, marshal. Care to break bread with us."

"Thank you, no."

"We're having beef stew. There's plenty for everybody."

Creed looked at his boots. It proved nothing; yet the tracks led here and a freshly skinned hide was in the tackroom.

Twenty minutes later a wire-thin fellow pounded into the yard. The dog lumbered up and stretched its way over to the horseman who dismounted and scratched the mutt's head. "I'm Whit Sparks, marshal. What can I do for you?"

"Somebody cut some cattle out of Aurora Wells' herd. There's a hide with her brand in your shed and you're eating fresh beef."

Sparks glanced at the tackroom. He shook his head. "There's no hide in there."

"It's right by the wall where you left it."

Sparks wet his mouth. "I heard about you and the Wells woman. Guess you've throwed in with the folks on the other side of the river. I didn't steal no cattle."

"You'll have to come in to Benbow."

"I ain't going to Benbow or nowhere else."

"Damn it, Sparks, be reasonable. This is nothing personal. You'll have your say in court."

"If I get to court. I know what's in your mind. Hait and the others made a fool out of you the other night. You figure to make yourself look good at my expense. Who do you think you are? Come busting onto a man's place, snoop around his property. You ain't got the right to do that. Since you hit Benbow, you been running over folks like you was God Almighty."

There was a popping sound to the right and Creed's gaze swung there. The woman's strained visage loomed from the porch. Behind her, the boy and girl were dim shapes. Creed looked back to the front. He had to take Sparks in! If he failed, it would be all over this country.

"Missus Sparks, tell your husband to drop his gunbelt. I don't want to have to shoot him."

The woman's voice quavered over the yard. "Do like he says, Whit."

"If there's a hide in that barn, he put it there. If he put it there, he can't afford to let me reach town."

Creed said, "We've talked enough," and stepped forward. He saw Spark's work-cramped hand dive toward his hip, saw Spark's calloused fingers claw at his gunbutt. Then Creed's own revolver slammed against his palm and the six-gun's report threw its rough explosion over the air.

Creed's ears wouldn't stop ringing, and he realized the ringing was the woman's high-pitched screams. The dog barked furiously. The scent of cordite hung in the wind. Motion blurred Creed's vision and he saw the woman and the two children rush past him.

She cradled Whit's head in her lap. "He's dead."

A coldness beaded Creed's body. He was sick at the stomach. "I didn't want it this way."

"Whit was a good man. He didn't steal no cattle."

Creed closed his eyes. When he opened them, he noticed the gun was still in his hand and he rammed it in his holster. "I'll get a blanket and put him in the wagon."

"We don't need no help from the likes of you. Just leave us alone."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Circle's gate was before Creed and he wheeled into the yard and pulled up at the hitching post. Sand spurted beneath his boots; he climbed the stairs and entered the house without knocking. Aurora stood at the stove and he said, "I had to shoot Whit Sparks."

"You killed him?"

"He drew on me."

"And it bothers you?"

"He had a wife and two kids."

"He's a thief and he tried to kill you. You had to protect yourself."

"I keep thinking there must have been some other way."

"Creed, you were doing your job. You can't blame yourself."

"Sparks was framed. He didn't take your beef."

"How do you know?"

"I just know. It makes me sick to think about it."

"I knew Whit Sparks. He was a shiftless no-gooder who let his family starve because he was too lazy to do more than talk and drink. You're the law. You can't let Whit Sparks and his kind run over you."

He threw his hat on a chair. Every word Aurora said was true but didn't change anything. He knew Sparks was innocent. He'd known it when he forced the play. He'd known Sparks would fight.

Sparks was like everyone else in this blasted country. He had no respect for the law and that lack of respect had killed him.

Her arm encircled his shoulders. He looked up and the empathy in her small-boned face tore at his breathing.

He said, "It's all right. Something had to give or I couldn't have held that bunch in check."

"You think Hait will fight?"

"After today Tip will have a hard time steaming his friends up."

"There's always been trouble. It's a natural result of the war."

"This thing's been lingering on for ten years, Aurora."

"These people won't forget. They don't want to forget."

Creed picked on his hat. "I've got to get into Benbow and make out a report but I had to see you first. After what happened, I needed you."

She lay her head on his chest and he didn't care about Sparks then. He didn't care about anything.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The boardwalk squealed under a man's weight and Larson stamped into the office. "You finally pulled it off, didn't you?

There's going to be a lot of blood on your hands, brother, and I hope to heaven you're satisfied."

"I take it you're talking about Whit Sparks."

"Have you got any idea how folks felt about that man? Every solitary soul on the east bank of the river's gonna want your hide."

"They'll calm down."

Larson shook his head. "You don't understand. You were at the dance with Aurora Wells. You killed Whit trying to find her cattle. That puts you on her side."

"I'll talk to Hait. There won't be any trouble."

Larson swallowed hard. His jaws trembled and the muscles in his forearms raised. "I've spent ten years keeping these folks from breaking loose and in two weeks you've wrecked everything I've accomplished. Maybe you don't think much of my kind of law but it worked."

"Billy Riely dead. Ed Dale dead. Henry Strong and Deuce Wells murdered. That's how your kind of law works."

"I lost a few, but nothing like what's coming. You must of been out of your head to shoot Whit Sparks."

"He drew on me."

"Why didn't you come to town and get a warrant? Ask me to go with you?"

"I've asked for your help before."

"I've lived in Benbow most of my life. These are my people. I don't like to see my people hurt, Weatherall. You come in here on your high horse with the attitude you're the law. Well, you ain't. You're just a man wearing a star same as me. You killed an innocent man, brother. That's your kind of law."

As Larson stamped from the office, Creed dropped into a chair. He was bone-tired and his head was splitting. Larson blamed him just as the whole country blamed him. Damn this bunch anyway. Why couldn't they abide by the law!

Later he made his way up South Street and rode the roan out of the livery stable. The sun dipped below the horizon as he cleared the creek. He made his ride in silence and eased into

Aurora's yard around nine o'clock.

Not wanting the hoofbeats to alarm her, Creed held the roan at a walk. He led the animal into the stable and without bothering to unsaddle, moved for the house. He came up on the lee side and, as he approached, saw a light shine from the bedroom window.

A man's voice rasped in the night. The voice sounded again in a faintly familiar tone and Creed took three rapid steps and halted at the window. Tip Hait's hairy frame loomed five feet away from him. Hait had his hands on his hips and stood with his side and back in Creed's direction.

Hait ran a hand through his tassled hair. "I looked out front but I didn't see anything."

Aurora stretched, yawned. "That's what I told you. No one would be coming here this time of night."

"That moon-struck marshal might." Hait sat down on the side of the bed. "I still don't see how you got him to kill Whit Sparks."

Creed knew a terrible surge of blind, black rage. His gun was in his hand and he aimed at a spot between Hait's shoulder blades. Aurora's gaze found the gun. She reared back from Hait and instinctly brought her fingers to her lips. Hait's head lifted and his beard looked like specks of gunpowder dusted over a greasy rag. Creed advanced into the light. His grip steadied. He knew exactly what he was about to do.

Lines ripped over Aurora's face and Tip bit at his lower lip. "You won't pull that trigger. It's murder. You're not made that way."

"I murdered Whit Sparks."

"Sparks had a gun."

The hammer depressed under Creed's thumb. The sound brought a yellowness to Hait's complexion and shot Aurora erect. "Creed, you can't do it. You're the law. That badge on your shirt says you can't settle things this way."

He glanced down at his shirt front. The star glared back at him, gold and glittering in the lamp's glow. He felt sick. Deathly

sick! But he couldn't do it. It just wasn't in him. He looked at the floor and there was a taste in his mouth like moulded hay. He wheeled then, jammed the gun in his holster and plodded back to the barn. He swung up on the roan and kicked her roughly ahead. His hands were huge knots on the bridle and there was a hole the size of Colorado in his belly.

He'd learned something tonight and he didn't like the looks of it. For a long time he'd been fooling himself, but he couldn't fool himself now. The truth was right there and he couldn't turn away from it.

He'd gone along professing that he lived for the law, and this same vanity had almost caused disaster a few moments ago. He'd been ready to shoot a man and a woman back there. Not because they were breaking the law but because they'd made a fool out of him.

He'd shot Whit Sparks because he couldn't stand failure. That was the long and short of it. Wade Dodge had got away so he'd killed Sparks as a sop to his humiliation. Looking back, he wondered how he could have been so blind. Tim Brown had known. He'd understood that Creed Weatherall would do the job no matter what lay in his way. His pride wouldn't let him stop and he'd cover his pride by claiming he served the law. Even Larson had seen through him! But what he'd almost done back there finished him. He didn't have the right to wear the star.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Creed gave the waitress his order and settled back in the chair. The hotel dining room was empty and for this he was glad. He didn't want to see anyone. He just wanted to sink deeper into his misery. Nothing mattered now. He would swallow his breakfast, get on the next stage and leave this wretched country.

He smelled coffee and the waitress placed his breakfast before him. He ate slowly, forcing each bite down the closed stric-

ture that was his gullet. At last the meal was finished and he lighted his pipe. Someone entered the dining room and he saw Kathleen advance toward him. She stopped at his table, her eyes going to his shirtfront. "Then it's true."

Something in her gaze made it hard for him to look at her. Her gaze stayed on his shirtfront and he put his hand there in a subconscious gesture.

Kathleen rested her weight on the back of a chair. "Once you told me you had the law. Now you have nothing."

"It's no concern of yours."

"But it is. I don't want my father's death to have been for nothing. You can't go."

"I've made too many mistakes. It's over for me."

"If you go, it will be over for all of us. What did Aurora do to you?"

"Who said anything about Aurora?"

"Remember that day on the hill. You said something about not missing things you'd never had. So Aurora disappointed you. That's no reason to quit."

"There's more to this than you know. It goes a long way back before Aurora."

"Tip Hait means to cross the river."

"That would have happened whether I came or not."

"I'm not blaming you for starting it. I'm blaming you for not stopping it."

"That has to be stopped by the law, not Creed Weatherall."

"Pin that star on your shirt and you are the law."

"I've set myself up as the law too long. That's the trouble."

"Do you think Larson and my brother can stop Tip Hait. You came here and put a little hope in my heart and now you want to run away."

"I'm not the man you think I am. Let it be."

"I won't let it be. My brother intends to stand against Tip Hait and Hait will kill him."

"Sit down. Sit down and listen. Ten days ago I'd have gone after Hait. I'd have killed him or been killed. I had that kind of

pride. I've been talking the law, but I got myself and the law all mixed up. A man like that has no right to wear the star."

She looked at him with a wisdom that seemed to absorb everything. He saw the proud lift of her chin, the transition of light and dark in her gaze. At that moment he forgot Aurora and for the first time saw Kathleen for what she was.

He stood up. Somehow this talk had cleansed him. He'd made his mistakes but his resignation was payment enough. Thanks to Kathleen, he could forget.

He put on his hat and turned for the foyer. Her voice pulled him around. "Creed, I don't know all that happened, but I know one thing. You can't forsake the law. Maybe you think so but you're wrong. It means too much to you. If you don't try to stop Tip Hait, you'll regret it the rest of your life."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Creed stepped out onto the veranda of the hotel. Up the street he saw Larson and young Strong point their ponies in his direction. He stepped off the porch and into the street as Larson pulled his mare in at the hotel. A copper star clung to his shirt and his eyes were the color of that star. Jim Strong reined alongside Larson and he wore a gun on his right hip.

The sheriff removed a half-smoked cigar from his mouth. "I'm going after Hait."

"That's a job you should have done a long time ago," Creed said staring up at the sheriff.

"Hait has ten or twelve men. Jim and I can't manage it."

"Then go sit on your behind the way you have the last ten years."

"You've fixed it so that won't do. You brought this on us, now you're going to help clear it up."

Creed dropped his gaze. He felt washed out, empty. Suddenly he was tired of talk . . . fed up with gaping spectators. He moved right, intent on crossing North Street. As he started off, Larson kneed the mare onto the walk blocking his progress.

Larson's hands were tight on the reins and pressure formed a ring around his lips. "What's wrong with you, Weatherall? If I'd done this two days ago, you'd have broken my neck."

"That was two days ago."

Larson shook his head. "You've changed. Maybe I've changed too."

"Why are you so dead set on sticking your nose into what's going on outside this town."

"What used to work won't work anymore. Like I told you, these people expect me to look out for them."

Creed's gaze eased over to young Strong. "I thought you didn't like to fight."

Jim swallowed awkwardly. "I'll fight for what's right."

Creed said, "I've made up my mind, Larson."

Kathleen's hand was on his arm. "Listen to me. If you run now, you'll never forget it. Don't let your pride prevent you from doing what you know is right."

His gaze focused on young Strong for a long moment. "Get a horse from the livery stable and bring it around."

Strong's face revealed nothing, but he turned his gelding up the street. Kathleen's hand increased its pressure.

Kathleen said, "What made you change your mind?"

Her hair was level with his chin and he caught the freshness of it. She was thinking of him and what he'd done, but he couldn't explain it. He was too ashamed. She'd been right about his running, for running it had been. The memory of Aurora and Hait had been too much. Kathleen had made him see that and more. The law had been his life too long. He'd never be able to walk away without regrets.

Dust rose a block away and Jim Strong rounded the corner, the roan trailing him. Himben crossed to his office and mounted a dun. Strong pushed through the mob, tossed the roan's reins outward and Creed caught them. He saw Kathleen near the doorway. Her lips formed words but he didn't hear them. Creed said, "Let's get on with it," and the four of them spurred up Main.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Two hours later they crossed the river, raced through a stand of lodgepole and climbed two forested ridges. Below, Able Crown's deserted house threw a short, box-like shadow over the land. Nothing moved as the lawmen surveyed the meadow.

Creed kicked the roan in the flanks. The animal began its descent, the other horses grouped behind. They reached the bottom of the slope and cut across the meadow and into the yard. The house stared silently at them and the front door sagged open. They pulled up and Creed dismounted and hunkered over some tracks. "Pretty fresh."

The wind freshened. It sawed against a stunted pine by the edge of the road in a jerking motion. Larson said, "Over by the corral." Creed's gaze jerked in that direction, saw the body strangely twisted on the ground. The four of them rode over, looked down. Larson flung his cigar to the ground. "He was one of the finest men in these parts."

"The tracks point north." Creed said. "Who's over that way?"

"Ken Lance."

They rode in silence. The wind ripped their faces and the horse's hooves sent back galloping echoes. Sometime later they caught the single shot of a revolver, followed by a staccato blast of gunfire. The firing grew louder, then ceased abruptly.

Creed threw up his hand. "I'll take a look." He gave his reins to Larson and bellied atop the line of rock obscuring their view. Fifty yards out he saw Lance's ranch house but it was the scene in the yellow-sand yard that caught his eye. Before the house Lance stood grimly. Facing Lance and one of his cowboys were a group of ten horsemen. Creed recognized Hait, Reams, Yarbough, Jones and Muley Owens.

Creed scuffed off the ridge and rejoined his crew. Guns in hand they spurred past the bend, and the sound of their running turned the attention of everyone in Lance's yard on them. Even

at this distance, Creed marked the astonishment thinning Hait's features. The raiding party spread out a little, and Yarbough's gray bucked excitedly.

Creed's posse pulled up. They were a rope's cast from Hait and Lance, a few feet more from Reams, Yarbough and the main party. Creed said, "You boys have bought yourselves a peck of trouble."

Hait's gun pointed at Creed. Their arrival had caught him off guard, but a wildness was in him. The men behind him shifted uncertaintly. This was Hait's play. He would decide what they did about the newcomers.

"Put up your guns," Larson said. "There's been enough killing."

Hait's gaze slammed over to Larson. "What's going on is between the east and west bank of the river. It don't affect the town. Now you head in to Benbow and your end of the bargain."

"The bargain didn't include Able Crown."

Brooks Reams shoved his mount forward. His countenance gleamed sweatily and the whites of his eyes seemed abnormally large. "The sheriff's right. This thing's gone too far already."

Yarbough's voice echoed reedily. "We can't quit now. We've started something and we've got to finish it."

Hait nodded. "What about Able Crown and the fellow over there on the ground. You think this crowd's going to forget that?"

Creed heard the squeak of leather. From the corner of one eye he saw young Strong shake his head. Larson and Himben didn't budge. Their guns were waist high and pointed at the riders ranked across from them. Except for Hait, Yarbough and Muley, these men were hesitant. Basically they were good men, drawn together by a bond forged by hate and time. They'd killed twice this day and their conscience was paying the price.

Hait stood, feet wide-planted, massive shoulders bowed forward. He seemed the only person in this yard untouched by pressure. He was in command. He meant to go on with this.

Creed considered what he had to do. He had a gun in his hand and so did Hait. It was an even break. All he could ask for. He said, "I'm settling this quarrel once and for all. Tip Hait and Aurora Wells have been using you people. They plan to . . ." He saw the shadows merge in Hait's eyes, knew what was coming. He shouted and kicked the roan hard in the ribs. At the same instance, he threw himself from the saddle. A gun shot broke loud across the afternoon and the roan charged straight ahead. Creed landed on his shoulder. He rolled to his back. His sights framed the center of Hait's chest and he squeezed the trigger.

As Creed crawled to his feet, Larson, Himben and Jim Strong kept the others covered. Lance walked over and checked Hait. Lance said, "He's dead," and his face tipped up in satisfaction. Color pounded back into his cheeks. "What about the rest of these killers?"

"They go back where they belong. This thing is over."

"Hait's death don't finish it. Anyone of them could have killed Ed."

Creed glanced at the man lying before the barn. Then he faced the rest of them. "They're all guilty. So are you. I don't want to hear anymore. Just listen and keep your mouth shut. I told Hait if he crossed the river I'd come after him. The same goes for the rest of you."

Yarbough's eyes flashed sullenly. He cradled the wounded arm over his ribs. "We're not dogs and won't be spoken to as such."

Brooks put a hand on Yarbough's reins. "Hold up, Ace."

Yarbough struck Brook's hand away. "I mean what I say."

"So do I," Creed answered. "Hait and Aurora kept this feud alive by murder and rustling. It's too late for you, but not for your children. There'll be no more trouble."

Creed saw relief depress the corners of Brook Ream's mouth, but neither what he'd said nor what had happened affected the rest of them. Nothing could ever change the ingrained antagonism of Lance and Yarbough and the others. His gaze swept up

to Muley Owens. "Who killed Deuce Wells?"

"I don't know."

"What about Henry Strong?"

"I don't know."

"Answer me and you get out of this. Otherwise, I can promise you six years of breaking rock."

Muley's gaze fell. His shoulders slumped. "Tip killed Henry. I don't know about Deuce."

"Who shot Dale and Riely?"

"Hait. Aurora would arrange a meeting in the hills and Tip would be waiting."

Silence blanketed the yard. Yarbough's mouth opened, closed. Reams stared at Creed. Lance's cheeks were flushed and angry; the men behind him showed disbelief. Aurora's part in this had shook them. They didn't quite comprehend.

Larson said, "What about Aurora?"

Creed's lips pulled in at the center. "If you don't mind, I'll take her alone."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When Creed rode into the Circle ranch yard, rain clouds had banked up like scales on a trout's back. At the hitching post he tossed the reins over the rail and walked toward the porch. At that moment Aurora rounded the house. She came up short, her jaw slack in astonishment.

"What are you doing here?"

Creed's tongue felt heavy. The talk with Kathleen had pushed this woman from his mind, but seeing her brought back all sorts of remembrances. "You're under arrest, Aurora."

"For what?"

"I know about Dale and Riely. I know about it all."

She half-smiled. "When Tip ends his business today, it won't make any difference what you know."

"Tip is dead."

Abruptly her green eyes slanted, her red lips mashed into a

red streak. "You killed him, didn't you?"

He nodded.

"Did you have to do that?"

"He called the turn."

She closed her eyes and her face was old and lined and lifeless. "I'm alone now. Really alone. Why did you have to come here? Why couldn't you leave us alone?"

He almost felt sorry for her. She looked so forlorn, so helpless. Then he remembered Dale and Riely and got control of himself. "It's time."

She looked beyond him and red hair broke over her shoulders. "I couldn't stand prison. You know that, don't you?"

"It isn't up to me, Aurora."

"But it is. Let me go, Creed. I'll do anything you want me to do, but you've got to let me go."

"You know I can't."

"Remember how it was? We were going to be together. That's what you wanted."

"It's too late for that."

"You're remembering last night. It meant nothing, Creed. Nothing! Those men on the east bank murdered my dad. I wanted to get even. I couldn't do it without help. That's where Tip came in. Can't you see that?"

Rain fell in broken patches. He said, "I'm not judging you, Aurora. The courts will do that."

She stepped closer. He caught the soap smell of her hair. "You don't want me now . . . all right. There's land. Cattle. Wealth. Tip and I couldn't pull it off, but we can. I'll give you any kind of a deal you want."

"You don't make deals with the law."

"I'm talking about people. You and me."

"It's between you and the law. Maybe that's hard to understand. If you hadn't come along, I wouldn't have understood it."

The rain strengthened to a fine drizzle. Her gaze centered on him and he saw acceptance in her eyes. "I'll need a few things."

Creed followed her into the house. She walked listlessly down the hall and entered the bedroom. She approached the dresser, opened the top drawer and rummaged around in it. He was a relaxed shape in the doorway, his thoughts vaguely occupied with her movements. Abruptly he caught a glimpse of her face in the mirror and something in her expression sent him sprinting across the room. Lamplight gleamed against steel as she whirled to meet him. Wind fanned his cheeks and a pistol's report blasted his eardrums.

His hand closed over hers and, trying to loosen her grip on the gun, he shook her roughly. She flung herself at him; her left arm encircled his neck and her fingernails clawed at his eyes. He bent forward, rammed his elbow straight back. He felt it hit home, heard the *whoosh* from her lungs. The revolver dropped from her fingers and she was a limp weight on his back. He pushed her away and she sprawled across the dresser, her desperate mouth sucking for air.

Rain slashed against the roof; wind rolled along the gutters in stormy violence. It would be miserable out there, but bad weather or not, they were riding to Benbow. He wasn't staying alone with this wildcat. He said, "Get what you need," and she wheeled sullenly to the dresser.

Creed packed the last of his clothing into the worn carpetbag. He made one final survey of the room, hefted the bag and descended the stairs. Kathleen Strong waited in the lobby. Her hair fell in golden lengths and her hands were clasped before her.

"I wanted to say goodbye."

"It was kind of you. I owe you a lot, Kathleen."

"Will you be coming back?"

He gazed long at her, noting the sensitive curl of her lips. Kathleen was quite a woman. He shook his head. "I don't know."

They moved into the street and paced up Main. Bob Himben came out of the newspaper office and stuck out his hand and Creed shook it and went on. They passed the bank, breasted Knight's store. Knight was in the doorway and he stared at Creed with an unreserved hostility. Across South Street the stagecoach sat before the Wells Fargo Office, and they tromped over the dusty intersection.

The driver clumped from the office, hurled a mail bag into the boot. Creed said, "Good-bye Kathleen." Impulsively, she pushed his hand aside and, leaning forward, kissed him. When she pulled back her cheeks were flushed. "Take care of yourself."

The driver hefted himself up to the seat and Creed climbed aboard. He looked out the window and Kathleen's eyes were direct and damp. The coach lurched into motion. He waved and saw her arm rise in reply. She passed out of sight and he settled back for the long ride to Denver. The stage began its tortuous climb up the high grade and, as it made the first bend, he saw the roofs of Benbow sparkle below him.

GOIN' TO TEXAS

By V. A. Glover

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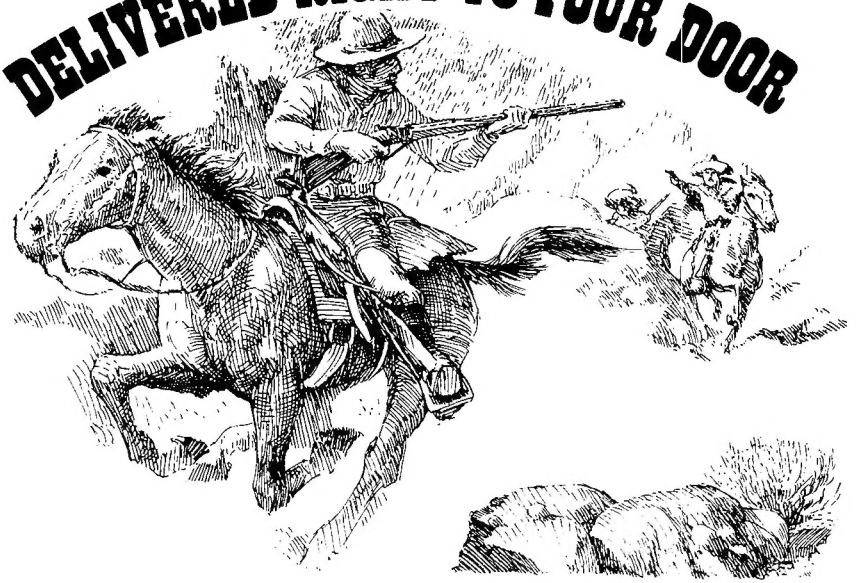

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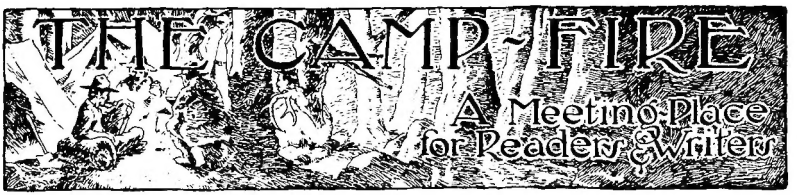

FROM SOMEONE WHO SHOULD KNOW

I have read several of your issues of FAR WEST and would like to congratulate you for an interesting and entertaining magazine.

I was especially impressed with the apparent concern your magazine has for authenticity, not only in the ways of the old west, but the tools, such as the firearms, as well.

Keep up the good work.

Phil Spangenberger
Black Powder Editor
GUNS & AMMO MAGAZINE

FROM A BUCKSKINNER

I was just getting set to plop down on my buffalo robe and scratch a few lines to you jaspers about not doin' any mountain man stories when the August issue of FAR WEST was dropped off by my local pony express rider . . . I was right pleased with the cover and tickled about three shades of pink to see a mountain man story inside. The real fine stuff was that the story, "Fire Dancer," was written by R.C. House, a man who's been to see the critter, and is a bonifidie buckskinnin' mountain man. Guess that's why the story was so good. I hate to admit it but for pilgrims you folks do right good work.

Tom "White Bear" Cameron
North of the Green River, Utah

FAR WEST FAN

I enjoy westerns on television very much. Thanks for your suggestion about writing to my local television station that I would like to see more westerns. Fortunately, I am able to see re-runs of "Gunsmoke" on one station.

Deborah Becker is one of your best authors. I enjoyed "Death of the Great Spirit" in the April issue and "Gallatin" in the June issue of FAR WEST. Your stories seem to get better all the time.

One of my favorites was "Shadow of a Gunfighter" by R.C. House.

I always hurry down to the newsstand when FAR WEST is on sale and buy the latest issue.

I am looking forward to more great stories in the future.

Eugene J. Buie
Waco, Texas

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